

Gifts, Bribes, and Development in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

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Beginning in the 1990s, development organizations launched a global anticorruption campaign. Throughout the world, including post-Soviet Kazakhstan, widespread corruption is generally viewed as a serious threat to economic development and political stability. This article addresses the practical problem of distinguishing gifts from bribes in a society like Kazakhstan, where some gifts function in part as bribes. The search for this nonexistent boundary reveals the limitations of categories such as "gifts," "bribes," and "commodities." In addition, by examining local perceptions of morality and corruption, this article provides insights for developing culturally appropriate development programs to fight corruption.

Key words: exchange, gifts, development, corruption, Kazakhstan

Employing self-interested bureaucrats, disregarding cultural and gender differences, straining local environments, and planning projects without local participation have all been touted as explanations for failed development projects (Hill 1986; Brain 1996; Ferguson 1990; Cernea 1991). In response to these critiques, development planners have made concerted efforts to develop "culturally compatible projects," to think about "sustainability issues," and to "put people first." Although these changes have certainly improved development projects in the past two decades,

they have not provided a magical cure for alleviating global inequality. In 1990, after 45 years of development efforts, there were over one billion people living in absolute poverty, with annual incomes of less than \$370 (World Bank 1990). This poor track record has prompted donor nations and their constituents to question whether development aid is a worthwhile expenditure. From 1991 to 1997, official development assistance has declined by one-third in real terms, from approximately \$73 billion to \$44 billion (World Bank 1998a). What can the development industry do to preserve its resources and reputation? In recent years, development experts have increasingly placed the blame on a familiar but forgotten culprit—corruption (Elliott 1997; Kaufmann and Siegelbaum 1997; Tanzi 1998).

Bribery, pilferage, and patronage are just a few of the more common forms of corruption. For a long time, these practices were regarded with some ambivalence. Bribery, after all, can be useful for "greasing the machine's wheel" or speeding things up. In the 1960s, a number of scholars argued that corruption might have some beneficial effects on economic and political stability in developing countries (Leff 1964; Bayley 1966). Similar yet stronger arguments have been made in the case of socialist countries (Kramer 1977; Ericson 1984; Grossman 1984). Accepting these "realities," industrialized countries, with the exception of the United States, have generally permitted bribes outside of their borders as tax-deductible business expenses.¹ The emergence of a global anticorruption campaign in the mid-1990s, however, has led to a reconsideration of these practices. No longer viewed as a benign tumor, corruption has been rediagnosed as the leading threat to economic and political stability in developing and transition economies around the world.²

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As the global anticorruption campaign gets underway, experts are trying to come up with ways to define and measure corrupt practices. One of the many problems involved with measuring and comparing corruption is that the forms of corruption vary widely from one society to the next, for both historical and cultural reasons. In fact, the boundaries between “corrupt” behavior and “cultural” behavior are not always clear, especially when it comes to the distinction between “bribes” and “gifts.” Where does one draw the line? In an IMF report on corruption, Vito Tanzi, a leader of the anticorruption campaign, acknowledges that it is difficult yet important to make this distinction. The way he distinguishes the two, however, should raise an eyebrow or two among economic anthropologists. He states: “In many instances, bribes can be disguised as gifts. A bribe implies reciprocity while a gift should not.” In a footnote, he elaborates further: “In practice, those who give gifts may expect some form of payment for them. For example, we expect love or good behavior from our children when we give them gifts; but the recipients of the gifts do not have an obligation to reciprocate (Tanzi 1998: 9).” Clearly, Tanzi has not read Marcel Mauss’s classic treatise on gift exchange. Further, by using the obligation to reciprocate as the primary criteria for distinguishing bribes from gifts, he has mistakenly linked reciprocity to immorality.

With this conceptual maneuvering, the global anticorruption campaign has rolled right into anthropological territory. For decades, anthropologists have argued that most forms of gift exchange involve an obligation to reciprocate, although reciprocity may come in the form of goods, services, or values. In many cases, gift exchange helps to create webs of relationships based on mutual obligations. These informal networks, moreover, function as safety nets for people with few economic resources, insufficient state welfare benefits, and/or limited access to goods and services (Halperin 1991; Ledeneva 1998; Sharma 1986; Stack 1973; Werner 1998; Werbner 1990; Yang 1994; Yan 1996). In the current atmosphere, development experts would probably define some of the “gifts” exchanged within these networks as “bribes,” especially when the recipients are employees of the state. At this point, should anthropologists unite to defend the practical aspects of gift exchange against attacks from the anticorruption campaign? Or, should this be viewed as a conceptual misunderstanding that should *not* prevent anthropologists from also jumping on the anticorruption bandwagon which allegedly stands for economic and social justice? This paper addresses these questions by exploring the relationship between development and corruption and the distinction between gifts and bribes in post-Soviet Kazakstan.

There are at least two reasons why Kazakstan provides an ideal setting for studying these issues. First, foreign and local development planners are convinced that the future of Kazakstan, which is in the midst of a difficult economic and political transition, hinges on the current efforts to curb widespread corruption. Even though corruption is not new to Kazakstan, it is viewed as a serious threat to economic and

political stability during this very important historical moment. Second, the case of Kazakstan is interesting because gifts and bribes both have a conspicuous presence, yet the boundary between the two is blurred. On the one hand, gift exchange is a defining aspect of Kazak culture. Kazaks regularly exchange gifts and they explain their preoccupation with gift exchange in terms of generosity and hospitality, two important values in Kazak culture. In the Kazak language, there is no single, generic term like the English “gift”: instead the language contains several different terms for specific categories of gifts and other ritual payments (see Table 1). On the other hand, some of these “gifts” function in part as “bribes,” thus blurring the boundary between the two forms of exchange.

Development in Post-Soviet Kazakstan

Before examining the problem of corruption in contemporary Kazakstan, it is important to consider the post-Soviet transition. The origins of the transition can be traced back to the late 1980s when Mikhail Gorbachev introduced economic and political reform under the rubric of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). The perestroika campaign sought to improve economic efficiency by creating new incentives for state-controlled production, while the glasnost campaign permitted open criticism of public policy and increased access to information. The glasnost campaign also involved the last of many historical efforts to rid the Communist Party of political and economic corruption (Clark 1993).

In December 1991, four months after the failed military coup in Moscow, Kazakstan somewhat reluctantly achieved independence, with neither struggle nor celebration. Shortly afterwards, the pace of economic and political change intensified. Following the lead of Russia, the government of Kazakstan, headed by President Nursultan Nazarbaev, launched the dual transition from a socialist planned economy to a capitalist market economy and from a one-party authoritarian system to a multiparty democratic system. In 1993, Kazakstan introduced its own currency (the *tenge*) and initiated a comprehensive structural reform program. As elsewhere, these structural reforms include: the liberalization of prices for consumer goods; the reduction of state subsidies for transportation, housing and other services; the privatization of some state-owned enterprises; and the downsizing of other state-owned enterprises.

In 1997, in an effort to regain lost support for economic change and to remind citizens that market economies do not develop overnight, President Nazarbaev repackaged the structural reforms as the “Kazakstan 2030” program. According to this plan, the country should be on par with advanced industrial nations by the year 2030. In Nazarbaev’s opinion, the development of the Central Asian republics in some ways will parallel the development of the “Asian Tigers” (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). However, the Central Asian path will be distinctive because these

Table 1. Categories of Gifts and Ritual Payments, South Kazakstan Province, 1990s

Name	Context	Content
<i>Syilyq</i>	Refers to feast gifts & "large" gifts; used interchangeably for <i>shashu</i> ; also refers to a contest prize or a <i>priz</i>	Varies
<i>Suynshy</i>	Small gift presented to bearer of good news, like a new birth	Cloth, clothing, \$\$
<i>Baighazy</i>	Gift to congratulate kin/friend for something new	\$\$; clothing
<i>Korimdik</i>	Small gift presented to a family for showing something new, like a new baby, a bride, or prepared <i>kiit</i>	Usually \$\$
<i>Shashu</i>	Feast gift from guest to host (especially wedding feast)	Usually \$\$
<i>Priz</i>	Counter-gift from host to guest given during a feast (also referred to as a <i>syilyq</i>)	Varies (clothing, toys)
<i>Qalyng-mal</i>	Bridewealth payment from groom's family to bride's family	\$\$, livestock
<i>Zhasau</i>	Dowry payment from bride's family to bride (sometimes referred to as <i>tosek-oryn</i> , literally "bedding")	Clothing; household goods
<i>Kiit</i>	Gifts to in-laws (<i>quda</i>) broadly defined	Cloth, clothing
<i>Minit</i>	Gifts to in-laws broadly defined (sometimes referred to as <i>kiit</i>)	Livestock, \$\$

countries already have a highly educated population and some established industries. Thus, Nazarbaev has declared that Kazakstan will soon become the leader of the "Central Asian Snow Leopards."

Throughout the 1990s, Kazakstan's new position within the post-Soviet global economy has influenced the transition process. With the waning of subsidies from Russia, Kazakstan has increasingly relied on the international community for investment capital, development aid, and technical advice. Of the five Central Asian republics, Kazakstan has received the most attention from foreign investors. This is in part due to economic policies that encourage foreign investment and in part because the country contains vast supplies of valuable petroleum and mineral resources (including gold, iron

ore, coal, and copper). Between 1992 and 1996, foreign investments in Kazakstan reached \$2 billion (USAID 1996).

In addition to these investments, the country has received multilateral and bilateral aid packages and assistance programs from a variety of sources, including the World Bank, the IMF, and the United States government. Kazakstan joined both the World Bank and the IMF in July 1992. Since then, the World Bank has approved nearly \$1.2 billion for 14 different projects in Kazakstan (World Bank 1998b) and the IMF has provided Kazakstan with \$386 million in credit (IMF 1995). Meanwhile, the United States government has sponsored a variety of programs for economic, political, and social development through the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Information Agency, the U.S.

Department of Commerce, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. These aid programs will probably continue in the future, as long as Kazakhstan continues to follow a number of conditions for restructuring economic and political institutions, which most likely include anticorruption measures.

The transition from a socialist planned economy to a capitalist market economy has not been easy for the people of Kazakhstan. While a small percentage of the population has benefited from the transition, the average standard of living has declined sharply throughout the 1990s due to increased unemployment, delayed salaries, and high inflation. Although the official unemployment rate is only 2 percent, the World Bank (1998b) estimates that this figure would be closer to 12 percent if involuntary leaves and part-time furloughs were included. Employment in and of itself does not guarantee economic security in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. In the mid-1990s, state salaries for many occupations were delayed for months. High inflation has also been difficult for everybody. In 1994, several months after food prices were liberalized and the new currency was introduced, the annual inflation rate in Kazakhstan reached an all-time high of 1,160 percent. The annual inflation rate dropped to 60 percent in 1995 and 12 percent in 1997 (World Bank 1998b), but the cost of living remained high for the average family since state salaries and pensions did not increase enough to compensate for the new economic situation.

In the post-Soviet period, employed and unemployed adults have sought alternative ways to make ends meet, or "to see the sun" (*kun koru*) as Kazaks say. In addition to becoming more subsistence-oriented, rural families have sold and slaughtered private herds of livestock for cash and food. More conspicuous, perhaps, is the growth of small-scale trade in urban and rural areas. In the post-Soviet period, people have flocked to the bazaars to buy and sell imported and domestic consumer goods. These activities can put considerable strains on households since some family members may spend days or weeks in other towns while trading. For successful merchants, economic profits may outweigh the social costs, but not all merchants are successful.

Social stratification is an unmistakable consequence of the post-Soviet transition. Some Kazaks are purchasing Mercedes Benzes and traveling abroad, while others are selling their last sheep to buy flour and eggs. It is difficult to determine the numbers, but it is clear that a minority of the population is benefiting from the transition while the majority is not. Not surprisingly, perceptions of the transition process reflect these differences. Those who are doing well generally support market reforms and blame the poor for being lazy, whiny, and inflexible. Meanwhile, those who are not faring so well resent the pace and extent of reforms and lament the end of an egalitarian ideology. As they search for explanations, many are finding scapegoats in the form of wealthy "biznezmen," "Mafia" leaders, and "corrupt" officials who allegedly have little concern for the welfare of others.³

Local and Global Campaigns Against Corruption

Public attitudes toward corruption have been heavily influenced by the local media, which regularly carries stories on crime and corruption. In the 1990s, the emergence of an independent media, combined with the loosening of controls on the state media, has led to a new style of reporting which corresponds to the overall transition toward democracy. When it comes to certain taboo subjects, such as the president's family ties and the political role of tribal lineages, the Kazakstani media has remained relatively "self-censored."⁴ However, when it comes to corruption, the media has truly tested the limits of this new "democracy." Through opinion pieces and investigative reporting, a number of journalists, especially those employed by independent newspapers, have been leading the local anticorruption movement. Their articles frequently include practical discussions and popular surveys on what should be done to eliminate or reduce corruption.

In addition to criticizing corruption on a general level, some journalists have gone a step further by writing exposes on specific cases of corruption, including cases where officials abused their positions of power, accepted bribes, and stole public property during privatization. In at least one case, the accused responded in a different independent newspaper, claiming that the original accounts were slanderous. Such counter-defamations are just one of the perils faced by these journalists. According to one Kazak journalist, officials who are guilty of corruption sometimes try to offer preemptive bribes to journalists in exchange for their cooperation while officials who are accused of corruption sometimes threaten and physically harm the journalists who expose them.

Although media reports of corruption were not uncommon in the Soviet era, the nature of reporting has changed dramatically in the past few years. During the Soviet period, the state controlled the media and thus manipulated the reporting of corrupt activities to its own advantage. Reports on corruption, for example, increased during the early 1960s, after Khrushchev initiated a massive attack on criminal and corrupt practices. Later, during the Brezhnev years (1964-1982), a number of illegal activities, such as report padding and supply hoarding, were largely ignored by the legal system and the media, in part because government officials realized these activities were beneficial to the state economy. Media accounts of corruption, moreover, often increased after a change in political leadership, when high-profile officials associated with the old guard were accused of embezzlement, bribery, report padding, and other crimes (Clark 1993: 71-99).

Whereas the articles on corruption in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years served the interests of the state, the articles in the late Soviet and post-Soviet years have served the interests of the public. As the articles themselves point out, many corrupt practices, such as bribery and pilferage, benefit the elite at the expense of the common people. Not only

do these articles push the state to take further action, they also arm the public with new knowledge. In the region where I worked, the public voraciously reads and heatedly discusses newspaper accounts of local corruption. Although a few people discount these articles as mere slander, many believe these articles confirm their worst suspicions of local leaders. For better or worse, these negative portrayals of greedy officials shape the way they understand their own situation.

These local attacks on corruption coincide with the global anticorruption movement. While local struggles against corruption are nothing new, the fight against corruption has taken on global dimensions in the 1990s. First, anticorruption movements have appeared almost simultaneously in a significant number of countries across the globe. Beginning with Italy in 1992, the "corruption eruption" has spilled into France, Japan, South Korea, India, Mexico, Columbia, Brazil, South Africa, and other countries (Glynn, Kobrin, and Naim 1997: 7).⁵ Second, *local* corruption has been reconceptualized as a problem that adversely affects the *global* economy. As economists note, the integration of the global economy makes it more difficult to contain local corruption and more ridiculous to permit transnational bribery (Glynn, Kobrin, and Naim 1997: 15-24).

Third, after decades of complacency, all the relevant international organizations have condemned corruption and introduced measures to fight it. The legality of transnational bribery has been a big issue. In 1977, the United States became the first country to pass a law making payment of a bribe in a foreign country illegal. In 1996, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), finally recommended that its 26 member-states should also implement laws to end the tax-deductibility of foreign bribes and criminalize transnational bribery (Pieth 1997: 119).⁶ In the late 1990s, similar efforts to make transnational bribery illegal and to coordinate anticorruption law enforcement have been made by the United Nations, the European Union, the World Trade Organization, the World Customs Organization, and the Organization of American States (Elliot 1997: 2-3). Another important issue has been the misuse of international development aid. In June 1996, the World Bank responded to this problem by revising its guidelines in a way that emphasizes "governance issues" in lending policies and ensures greater transparency and accountability in bank-sponsored projects (World Bank 1998c). Through these measures, the expansion of the global anticorruption campaign is influencing local anticorruption campaigns throughout the world, including Kazakhstan.

In the past few years, the "corruption eruption" has also received considerable attention from scholars, especially in the fields of economics and political science. In this paper, I would like to consider the potential contribution anthropologists could make to the study of and the struggle against corruption. Corruption, like poverty, is a global problem that negatively affects many of the people anthropologists study. At the same time, the global campaign against corruption, like the fight against poverty, is something that deserves a

critical assessment. In particular, anthropologists could play an important role by comparing the way local people define corruption with the way it is defined by powerful global organizations. In so doing, anthropologists could make recommendations for devising culturally appropriate development programs for fighting corruption. In the remainder of this paper, I will make a limited effort to do this by describing local practices of gift exchange and bribery as well as local attitudes toward these practices.

Gifts and Bribes in Kazakhstan

Any anthropologist who wants to research and write about bribery or corruption must be prepared to deal with a number of ethical, methodological, and conceptual problems. These dilemmas may help to explain why there are so few anthropological studies of bribery and corruption, even though anthropologists frequently conduct research in countries with very high levels of corruption.

Due to the nature of anthropological fieldwork, it is impossible to conduct research on "bribery" and "corruption" without encountering some ethical problems. Is it possible for anthropologists to write about these practices without putting their informants and friends in serious jeopardy? Can the benefits of writing about corruption outweigh the potential costs? I believe it is possible for anthropologists to write about corruption and bribery in a responsible way. I also believe such writings may have a positive impact on the implementation of local and global anticorruption campaigns.

To protect those who may be associated directly or indirectly with my research, I have intentionally withheld any information that could be traced back to any particular individual, whether informant or alleged bribe-receiver. Identifying people who shared these stories with me would be much like finding a needle in a haystack. Few of the accounts mentioned here have any connection with people living in "my" town. Many of the accounts are based on conversations I had while living in the former capital Almaty or while traveling on trains from Almaty to Shymkent.⁷ Without underestimating the potential risks, I would like to add that the information I gathered is *relatively* harmless. I never directly observed any bribe-giving or bribe-receiving, and all the secondhand accounts I did manage to collect are limited to relatively small forms of corruption. Through the careful selection and presentation of materials, the potential benefits of writing this article should outweigh any costs I was not able to foresee. In terms of benefits, writing about bribery can lead to new theoretical perspectives for understanding exchange and the informal economy, and new practical insights for developing culturally appropriate methods for fighting corruption in Kazakhstan.

In the study of bribery, as soon as the ethical hurdles are cleared, the methodological hurdles approach. How will interview questions about bribery and corruption shape the process of building and maintaining trusting relationships with informants? Who is going to admit bribe-giving or bribe-

receiving in a context where both practices are considered illegal and, in some contexts, immoral? If somebody does describe an incident that involves other participants, how can any version of the story be confirmed? These three problems make it difficult to study bribery, and unfortunately there are no easy solutions.

I will briefly sketch how I have dealt with these problems. First, it was probably to my advantage that I did not intend to study bribery and corruption. Since I set out to study gift exchange and market exchange, most of my interview questions centered on these less sensitive issues. Only in the process of doing this research did I become interested in bribery. As my research moved in this direction, I started to ask hypothetical questions about bribery. Since corruption is a frequent topic in the news and in daily discourse, this was not perceived as an unreasonable request. People who claimed they did not have any personal experiences with bribery had learned quite a bit about the subject through rumors and gossip, and they did not mind sharing this information.

During some of these conversations, I felt comfortable enough to ask somebody to talk about situations where they had actually given bribes (*para*), but I never felt like it was appropriate to ask somebody to disclose whether or not they had accepted bribes. Although the morality of bribery is widely contested today, Kazaks generally regard bribe-receiving to be much more offensive than bribe-giving. In the Former Soviet Union, as elsewhere, the penalties for accepting or extorting bribes were much higher than the penalties for offering a bribe (Clark 1993: 79-85). Although the criminal laws have changed in the post-Soviet period, this general rule has remained true. Correspondingly, people were more willing to admit incidents where they presented a bribe to somebody else. Sometimes, this information was even volunteered, when I was asked questions about household expenses. In contrast, only a few drunken braggarts divulged the fact that they received bribes. Given the ethical complications, I never tried to substantiate any specific accounts of bribery. While my approach to studying bribery is somewhat haphazard, I did manage to acquire considerable information about the contexts in which bribes are most frequently presented, the cash value placed on bribes for various services, and the proper etiquette for presenting bribes.

Ethical and methodological problems aside, the study of corruption also presents a conceptual challenge. It is no easy task to define corruption or any one of its constituent forms. It appears in a wide variety of forms—including bribery, fraud, embezzlement, nepotism, and patronage—with varying degrees of malfeasance. The generally accepted definition of corruption is the “abuse of public power for private gain.” Scholars, however, have noted that each of the three elements in this definition can be problematic. First, corruption is not limited to the public sector, although private sector corruption is not a major concern from the development perspective. Second, regarding private gain, corrupt acts sometimes benefit somebody or something other than the public official who commits an illegal act. And, most impor-

tantly, what constitutes abuse will vary depending on legal and cultural standards (Johnston 1997: 62; Tanzi 1998: 8-10). I would add that the informal procedures for successfully engaging in corrupt activities are also embedded in the local culture.

One form of corruption, bribery, is particularly difficult to define in cultural settings where it takes on the guise of gift exchange. This is the case in China, where the exchange of wedding gifts often creates social debts that may be reciprocated in part through the abuse of public power (Kipnis 1997; Yang 1994). Comparable forms of gift exchange take place in Kazakhstan. Anthropologists, in a rather extensive body of literature on gift exchange, have critically examined the boundary between gifts and commodities (Mauss 1925; Levi-Strauss 1949; Gregory 1982; Hunt 1998). There are relatively few studies, however, that explicitly address the boundary between gifts and other forms of noncommodity exchange, such as barter exchange and bribery (Bloch and Parry 1989; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992; Ledeneva 1998; Smart 1993). Although some of the established criteria for distinguishing gifts and commodities can be useful for teasing out the distinctions between gifts and bribes, it is necessary to examine the gift-bribe boundary in its own right. This is not just a question of semantics. In fact, I would argue that it is impossible and imprudent to draw a firm boundary between the two forms of exchange. This is especially true for Kazak society, where the category of “gift” is clearly an imported construct, as there is no single, generic concept that applies to all categories of gifts and ritual payments.

Why, then, am I even interested in looking at what can only be an artificial boundary between gifts and bribes? First, the search for this nonexistent boundary reveals the very limitations of anthropological categories such as “gifts” and “commodities.” Second, this investigation sheds some light on the contested ways Kazaks perceive corruption and morality and the ways these perceptions are changing in the post-Soviet period. These insights, in turn, might be useful for developing local programs for fighting corruption.

On Table 2, I have listed several possible criteria for distinguishing gifts and bribes. These criteria are based on the ways gifts and bribes, as well as gifts and commodities, are typically distinguished in the social science literature. Since my central argument is that there is no clear boundary between gifts and bribes, this table should be regarded as a heuristic tool, not a perfect typology. Before going further, I should mention that many gifts exchanged in Kazakhstan have nothing to do with bribery, just as many incidents of bribery bear little resemblance to gift exchange. To define the blurred boundary between the two forms of exchange, I am first going to discuss gift exchange and bribe exchange in Kazakhstan as if there is no conceptual quandary. Then, I will turn to a few examples that suggest that some types of exchange fall somewhere between a gift and a bribe.

Gift exchange has a very conspicuous presence in Kazakhstan. The families I surveyed believe they spend over

Table 2. Possible Criteria for Distinguishing Gifts from Bribes

Criteria	Gift	Bribe
Content of exchange	Not cash	Cash
Quality of relationship between giver and recipient	Personal (long-term)	Impersonal (short-term)
Location of exchange	Not at work	At work
Employment status of recipient	Irrelevant	Official
Obligation to reciprocate	Understood, but when and how is not stated	Explicitly stated
Time before exchange is reciprocated	Delayed	Immediate
Number of exchanges	Multiple	Single
Motive for exchange	To maintain; to return a gift, etc.	To get something done quickly; to avoid a hassle
Cultural definition of exchange	Traditional	Immoral
Context of exchange	Gift-giving occasion	Not gift-giving occasion
Transparency of exchange	Transparent	Discreet
Legal definition of exchange	Legal	Illegal

half their household income on gifts and ritual payments, especially during the feasting season which runs from late summer to late fall. It is difficult to calculate the amount of resources spent on gift exchange because some but not all of the goods exchanged are recycled.

The various Kazak terms that can be translated as “gift” in English are not synonyms. As Table 1 indicates, different situations call for different categories of gifts. For example, whenever the family receives some exceptionally good news, they give the bearer of good news a small gift of cloth or money, called a *suynshy*. For example, after learning her 20-year-old daughter had safely delivered a baby boy, the mother of my host family gave a *suynshy* gift to the person who first informed her of this news. While the *suynshy* recognizes the bearer of good news, the recipient of good news may also

become the recipient of another type of gift, the *baighazy*, if the good news relates to the acquisition of a new object. For example, one day somebody presented me with a small amount of money as a *baighazy* to congratulate me on the fact that somebody else had just given me a sheep.

A large assortment of gifts and ritual payments are exchanged in connection with weddings and other life-cycle events. To begin, close friends and relatives congratulate each other on the birth of a new child or the arrival of a new bride by presenting a *korimdik*. The word *korimdik* comes from the root word *kor*, “to see,” and refers to a small gift of money offered in exchange for viewing something new for the first time. In addition, a different type of gift, a *syilyq* or *shashu*, is presented when a family sponsors a large feast (*toi*) to commemorate a new birth, a new marriage, male circumcision,

or a birthday. On these occasions, each of the families invited to the feast present the host household with a gift. Anywhere from 100 to 800 guests may attend the large wedding and circumcision feasts. The term *syilyq* most often refers to nonmonetary gifts, such as rugs, livestock and electronic goods, while the term *shashu* generally refers to monetary gifts. The value of either varies depending on the context and the relationship between guest and host households. Finally, during the course of a feast, the host household presents most of the guests with a smaller counter-gift, or *priz* (a Russian word). The counter-gifts are usually presented by the feast master of ceremonies who also ensures that all of the guests are invited to the front area, in small groups, where they have the opportunity to give a short toast to the host household. After each set of toasts and a musical interlude, the master of ceremonies presents each of the toast-givers with a counter-gift, such as a woman's headscarf, a man's dress shirt, a child's toy, or perhaps a shot of vodka.⁸

Finally, for a new marriage, the two principal families present each other with several additional categories of goods. This includes the bridewealth (*qalyng-mal*), a ritual payment from the groom's family to the bride's family, and the dowry (*zhasau* or *tosek-oryn*), a ritual payment from the bride's family to the bride herself. In addition, an expensive array of gifts, including both clothing (*kiit*) and livestock (*minit*), are exchanged between the two sets of new in-laws (*quda*).

Though less conspicuous than gifts and ritual payments, bribes are also exchanged in Kazakhstan on a frequent basis for a variety of occasions. I will never forget the first time I got off a plane in Kazakhstan. I was dreading the long and infamous process through passport control, customs, and baggage claim, when I jealously noticed a fellow traveler, a well-dressed Kazak, go no more than 10 steps from the bottom of the jet's stairway, across the tarmac, and into a foreign, chauffeur-driven automobile. Assuming this man must be somebody important to get around airport security and customs procedures, I asked the European businessman who sat next to me on the flight if he had any idea who this man might be. He had already spent several months in Kazakhstan, and in his opinion, the man was probably not an important political figure. Most likely, his driver had simply bribed the guards in exchange for easy tarmac access, as Kazakhstan was a place where "nothing is allowed, but everything is possible."

I heard numerous accounts of bribery including accounts of traffic police and customs officials who take bribes for real and imagined offenses: judges who receive bribes for favorable sentences; employers who secure bribes in exchange for available positions; and university officials who accept bribes for admission. The Kazak word for bribe, *para*, is consistently used in reference to these illegal exchanges with various authority figures. Alternatively, the word *syilyq* may be used, especially if the bribe comes in the form of an object, such as a watch or suit that is given to a doctor in exchange for a more thorough examination.

Bribery is by no means peculiar to Kazakhstan. Throughout the world, bribery frequently occurs in situations where

public officials who are underpaid are given the exclusive power to regulate a number of activities. In other words, bureaucrats who control the flow of documents, such as building permits and passports, or the observance of regulations, such as traffic laws and legal procedures, have the potential to abuse their authority by extracting bribes. Officials who choose to cross this line generally provide a quick service or a limited privilege to individuals who offer or pay bribes. Meanwhile, they employ several arbitrary explanations to stall, refuse or harass individuals who don't pay a bribe. Given the structure of the system, there are personal incentives for both the bribe-giver and the bribe-recipient to partake in the system.

The fact that something is legally and culturally regarded as a bribe does not mean that it is equal to all other bribes—the monetary value of a bribe may be either a nominal amount or a large sum, and the nature of exchange may be either voluntary or forced (Elliot 1997: 188-193). For example, in Kazakhstan, a traffic policeman may extort a relatively small amount of money, the local equivalent of a few dollars, from an innocent driver. In a different context, a young man who needs a job might voluntarily pay a bribe of \$500 to \$1,500 to a military official, who in return will forge a document specifying that the young man was exempt from military service for health reasons (\$500) or a document specifying that the young man actually did complete military service (\$1,500).

In Kazakhstan, everybody realizes that *para* exchanges are illegal, but people take different positions when it comes to the morality of such exchanges, which further varies depending on the context. In popular discourse, views on the morality of bribery are context-specific in that people factor in the content of the bribe, the official's personality and generosity, his or her regular salary, the estimated amount of income received from bribery, how this income compares to other officials in the same position, and whether or not the bribes are voluntarily presented. Needless to say, these factors are not the same ones that international development experts mention when they talk about the problem of corruption.

The examples of bribery I have presented suggest that perhaps "everything is possible" in Kazakhstan. But, this is only true if you know the rules and have the right connections. Similar to gift exchange, there are culturally informed etiquette procedures for presenting bribes. Individuals who want to give a bribe must know who is willing to accept a bribe, how much and what they need to give, when and where they can safely give the bribe, and what they need to say or do when they make the presentation. In many respects, bribery is an acquired skill. For this reason, older men who have lots of experience, as well as lots of connections, handle the most important bribes for a family. This includes the large bribes that are presented for university admission and employment acquisition.

The etiquette associated with bribery varies greatly depending on the nature of the bribe. For example, bribes for

university admissions or employment require personal connections, bribes for traffic tickets or small documents do not. Bribes for certain documents, such as the forged military documents, are based on a fixed scale, while bribes for other services, such as a high grade in a university class, are based on a sliding scale which may take into account family income. Bribes for most documents must be in the form of cash, while bribes for certain services, such as grades and medical care, may be presented in the form of material goods. The value of a bribe for a traffic infraction is explicitly demanded, while the value of bribes for documents and services must be acquired through informal research.

Although bribery practices depend on the context, there are a few general rules. For example, bribes should be presented in a discreet manner. In most offices in Kazakhstan, the supervisor has a private office, while his subordinates do not. A cash bribe given to a subordinate who shares an office with others should be concealed in a folder with other documents pertaining to the case. When the bribe is presented, the bribe-giver might signal that he or she has placed a bribe in the folder by saying something like "this is for your children" or "this is for you to have some tea," implying that the giver understands that times are hard and the amount is of little consequence.

As these examples demonstrate, most of the criteria listed on Table 2 to distinguish bribes from gifts do not apply in all situations. To begin, it is impossible to distinguish gifts from bribes by examining the content of the exchange. Simply put, some gifts come in the form of cash and some bribes come in noncash forms. It is also impossible to distinguish a gift from a bribe by determining the quality of the relationship between bribe-giver and bribe-recipient. Since bribery is illegal, bribes of a significant value often entail some kind of personal relationship between the giver and the receiver. Bribe-receivers are less likely to accept bribes from somebody they do not know personally and therefore cannot trust. In Kazakhstan, people who do not have the necessary connections themselves may rely on an intermediary who can vouch for them or actually present a bribe on their behalf. Personal connections are also invaluable when the bribe is presented in exchange for a limited commodity, such as a job.

The very fact that bribes sometimes involve personal relationships makes it even more difficult to use other criteria to distinguish bribes from gifts. For example, if the giver and the recipient are friends or relatives, the site where the exchange takes place is irrelevant. In other words, just as a gift can be presented at work, a bribe can be presented at somebody's home. Similarly, the employment status of the bribe-recipient is a bad criterion for distinguishing bribes from gifts, because there is no valid reason why a friend or relative cannot give a culturally appropriate gift to a government official. The issue of reciprocity is also complicated when it comes to exchanges between friends and relatives. At this point, the form of corruption often changes from bribery to nepotism. In these cases, a bribe payment may be waived

altogether, especially if there is an equivalent exchange of favors which may or may not also involve the official abuse of power.

Certainly, the motivation behind an exchange is an important criterion for distinguishing bribes from gifts. But, what happens when the motivations behind gift-giving are complex? In Kazakhstan, this is especially the case for gifts that sometimes function in part as bribes. Here I would put more emphasis on feast gifts (*syilyq* and *shashu*) and in-law gifts (*kiit* and *minit*) than other categories of gifts. The "sometimes" refers to occasions where a government official is sponsoring a feast (*toi*) or taking part in an in-law party (*qudalyq*), and thus is in a culturally appropriate position to receive expensive gifts from relatives, friends, and, in the case of in-law parties, from previous strangers. In-law parties are particularly interesting because they provide a chance for each party to a new marriage to introduce its inner circle of friends and relatives to the other side. When the bride's parents or the groom's parents attend an in-law party, they strategically think about who to invite to go with them to their new in-laws' home where they are showered with hospitality and gifts. A number of factors go into the selection of the seven or eight "in-laws." The presence of a government official conveys the important social message that the family is well-connected. Persons of authority therefore are frequently invited to participate in an in-law party delegation. As part of the delegation, they receive an assortment of gifts from the hosts, who may have been virtual strangers before, but in the course of a single day are transformed into kin.

So, when government officials receive such gifts, despite the fact that they are presented in a transparent manner during a culturally appropriate moment, they function in part as bribes. This does not mean that Kazaks conceive of these gifts as bribes. On the contrary, they are viewed as "traditional" forms of exchange which express hospitality and generosity. However, the motives for presenting these types of gifts are complicated. On the one hand, feast gifts and in-law gifts are exchanged as a way to maintain and create new social relationships, to avoid the shame of not giving a gift, and to convey messages about social status. But, on the other hand, there may also be a more strategic element to these forms of gift-giving. People know that persons of authority can grant them favors and they know that personal connections are helpful in obtaining favors that involve the abuse of official office. In this way, personal connections, which are maintained and extended through gift exchange, serve to reduce or nullify the cost of a bribe.

Perhaps the only criterion left to distinguish gifts from bribes is the legality of the exchange. But, this criterion does not help to explain why some forms of exchange are acceptable in the first place, while others are not. While the legal definition of bribery would include the motivation, the obligation and the content of the exchange, as well as the bribe-recipient's employment status, the boundary between gifts and bribes is much more difficult to determine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, corruption hinders development efforts in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Stirred by the global campaign against corruption that emerged in the 1990s, local journalists and politicians are initiating local anticorruption movements in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. If legal efforts are necessary to fight corruption, should Kazakhstan simply adopt the anticorruption legislation promoted by powerful global organizations? Among other things, these laws prevent government officials from accepting gifts from other individuals, thus reducing the temptation to show favoritism toward those who provide gifts.

From an anthropological perspective, the adoption of such legislation is problematic on many levels. First, it is important to take a critical look at why global organizations are strongly promoting anticorruption measures. Are these organizations primarily interested in fighting the social injustices resulting from corruption? Or, are they primarily interested in protecting the investments of Western-dominated transnational corporations? The latter seems to be the case, since powerful countries, such as the United States, are taking relatively small steps to eliminate their own culturally accepted forms of corruption, such as campaign "donations" (Bell and Avenarius 1999). However, by encouraging anticorruption legislation in developing countries such as Kazakhstan, global organizations make it easier for international businessmen to avoid the hassle of learning unfamiliar business practices.

Second, before implementing new anticorruption laws, it is important to consider the possible unintended consequences. In Kazakhstan, gift exchange is viewed as an important part of Kazak culture. Although some gifts function in part as bribes, the exchange of gifts is not perceived as immoral behavior. To be effective, anticorruption legislation must develop measures to limit the exchange of gifts that function in part as bribes. These measures, however, would probably be viewed as an unwelcome attack on Kazak culture. In addition to being perceived as an attack on Kazak culture, anticorruption laws may have the unintended consequence of targeting the wrong individuals. As Soviet history demonstrates, the introduction of anticorruption campaigns often opens the door for practices akin to witch-hunting. Individuals who would ideally be targeted by these efforts tend to possess both the connections and the skills necessary to avoid being caught. At the same time, the most corrupt individuals often use these campaigns to root out their enemies.

Finally, it is important to consider whether the anticorruption legislation promoted by powerful global organizations is appropriate for a local setting where gift exchange is an integral part of the culture. As this article demonstrates, global organizations and local actors do not necessarily share the same understandings of what constitutes corrupt behavior. This is particularly the case when it comes to the distinction between gifts and bribes. Although there are no easy solutions in the fight against corruption, developing countries such as Kazakhstan should develop anticorruption legis-

lation that takes local perceptions of morality into account. On a practical level, it would be much easier to gain support for an anticorruption campaign that is initially targeted against those forms of exchange that are already perceived to be immoral. At the same time, the government could introduce educational programs that link the anticorruption movement to notions of nationalism, patriotism, and social justice.

Notes

¹This was also true for the United States until 1977 when the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) made it illegal for U.S. businessmen to pay bribes to foreign government officials. This law was prompted by the Watergate scandal, which included money laundering through foreign banks, and the Lockheed Corporation case, which involved \$25 million in bribes to Japanese officials and the subsequent criminal conviction of the Japanese Prime Minister. Many U.S. businessmen have argued that the FCPA gives them an unfair disadvantage in international markets which has cost them tens of billions of dollars in contracts (Glynn, Kobrin, and Naim 1997: 17-19).

²Economists and political scientists today unanimously agree that bribery is bad for the economy and society as a whole. Among other things, bribery diverts resources, exacerbates income inequities, deters foreign investments, facilitates organized crime, and undermines political legitimacy (Elliot 1997: 1-5; Rose-Ackerman 1997: 31-34; Tanzi 1998: 22-29).

³These groups are neither mutually exclusive, nor perceived to be such.

⁴The independent press is theoretically a "free press," but there are still a number of challenges. According to the *New York Times* (October 10, 1998), "[M]any journalists accuse the government of making it difficult for a new press to register a new publication and putting quiet pressure on editors to stick to the official line." After a few years of increased freedoms, these pressures intensified in the second half of 1998 as the January presidential election approached.

⁵Moises Naim coined the term "corruption eruption." Possible explanations for this corruption eruption include advances in technology, which have brought increased access to information, and the end of the Cold War, which had long provided an external enemy (Glynn, Kobrin, and Naim 1997: 7-15; Tanzi 1998: 4-8).

⁶The OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Officials took effect on February 15, 1999. Twenty-nine member-states (now expanded to include Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) and 5 nonmember-states (Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, and the Slovak Republic) have all committed themselves to ensuring that their national parliaments will approve the convention and make the necessary legal changes (OECD 1999).

⁷From 1992 to 1998, I have spent a total of eight months in Almaty. I have made the journey from Almaty to Shymkent on numerous occasions, often alone, where I have had lengthy conversations with other travelers.

⁸The quality of the counter-gifts, like the quality and the quantity of the food and drinks, is one way people measure and evaluate a household's social standing relative to other households. On a few limited occasions, I attended a feast with the family and we all came home empty-handed. People pointed out that this was not particularly unusual, especially if the guests were simply acquaintances of the host household, but it was somewhat inappropriate.

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