

## CONSUMING MODERNITY, IMAGINING TRADITION: GLOBALIZATION, NATIONALISM AND WEDDING FEASTS IN POST- COLONIAL KAZAKSTAN

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In 1994, on a typical evening in rural Kazakhstan, I was watching television with my host family on their new Korean-made television. My host father, who was anxiously awaiting for coverage of the World Cup games to begin, repeatedly used the remote control to channel surf between a Russian television station, which was broadcasting a dubbed version of the popular Mexican soap opera, "Simply Maria," and a Kazakstani station which was showing a Kazak-language movie. He paused for a few minutes on the Kazakstani station to watch an entertaining advertisement for a Kazak company that sells foreign cars.

At the beginning of the commercial, a large group of Kazak men on horseback are galloping madly across a scenic mountain valley. As the camera zooms in on the group, it becomes clear that they are playing *kokpar* (more commonly known as *buzkashi*), a Central Asian sport that has recently been restored as a legitimate national pastime after being banned for several decades by the Soviet government. The sport resembles polo except that there are no sticks and the object of play is a goat carcass, not a ball. Dressed in a "traditional" manner, the horseback riders in the commercial look as if they are trapped in a timeless, nomadic past. The commercial continues as one player charges across the valley, deftly holding the goat carcass in place across the horse's withers. His teammates try to protect him while members of the opposing team struggle to grab the coveted object. With great difficulty, one of the opponents manages to snatch the goat away and to turn his horse in the opposite direction. Suddenly, a sleek and shiny black sport utility vehicle emerges in the distance. The undulating terrain presents no problem for this powerful vehicle which quickly catches up to the riders, who now appear to be living in the "modern" world. The driver opens his power window and smiles broadly as the rider passes him the goat. As soon as he has a tight hold on the carcass, the driver speeds off into the horizon leaving the riders behind in a trail of dust. After briefly stating the sponsor's name, the commercial ends.

There are multiple ways to interpret this commercial and there are at least two messages for Kazak viewers: the first invites them to consume foreign goods, while the second encourages them to remember their national traditions. Although the quality and creativity of this commercial make it somewhat exceptional, the odd juxtaposition of the past and the present is hardly unusual in post-Soviet Kazakhstan (or other regions of the world, for that matter). On a daily basis, the Kazaks are bombarded with messages that encourage them to pursue both "traditional" and "modern" practices. On the one hand, the official revival of Kazak nationalism includes the proliferation of publications describing "authentic," pre-Soviet traditions and tribal genealogies, as well as the celebration of new holidays and events glorifying the past. All of the Kazaks I interviewed mentioned that they are proud of the fact that their families are making an effort to restore lost practices and knowledge. On the other hand, the fall of the Soviet Union, which had long maintained a nearly impenetrable barrier to Western and global forces, has ushered in a comprehensive restructuring of the global economy. As the government of Kazakhstan adopts global models for restructuring economic and political life, Kazak consumers, who previously did not have direct or legal access to many "Western" commodities, are now intrigued by the deluge of "imported" consumer goods.

In anthropological terms, the Kazaks are able to acquire "cultural capital" by consuming modern "imported" goods *and* by reconstructing national traditions. This article examines the connection between these two processes, at the national and local levels in post-colonial Kazakhstan. At the national level, this article briefly examines the twin processes of state-building and nation-building. And, at the local level, this article analyzes the recent changes in Kazak weddings and marriage, which have been influenced by the simultaneous upsurge of global culture and the revival of Kazak nationalism.

### Locating the "Traditional" in the "Modern" World:

The presence of "Western" consumer goods in exotic, non-Western worlds often seems odd to the casual tourist, but is hardly new for cultural anthropologists who for decades have examined the intersection of the local and the global. Over the years, anthropologists have revised the way they understand social change and explain the co-existence of "traditional" and "modern" goods, ideas and practices. The Gary Larson cartoon, which depicts natives hiding their electronic goods so not to disappoint the anthropologists who are marching up the hill towards their village, reminds us of the tendency in our discipline's past to romanticize the "traditional" and to create a strong distinction between "traditional" and "modern" forms. In fact, it wasn't so long ago when anthropologists actually debated whether or not the discipline of socio-cultural anthropology could even survive if the "primitives" ceased to live like "primitives."

It is hardly remarkable that these fears developed at a time when modernization theory was popular. Modernization theory holds that the transition from a subsistence-based to an industrial-based economy brings about an overall transition from "traditional" to "modern" society. The acquisition of "modern" consumer goods is viewed as an early stage in the inevitable process of social change and cultural erosion. First, the members of a society embrace Western material goods, and then later, they start to adopt the economic behavior, cultural values and family structure of the "modern" Western world.

By the late 1960s, scholars representing different theoretical approaches were becoming equally dissatisfied with modernization theory. On one front, the post-modern critique in anthropology challenged the fundamental concepts of modernization theory. Post-modern anthropologists demonstrated that the dichotomy between the "traditional" and the "modern" was a social construction. If "traditions" can be invented (Ranger and Hobsbawm 1983), the "traditional" is only regarded as such when individuals grant it some degree of authenticity. Anthropological texts, moreover, helped create and perpetuate this dichotomy by consistently representing "traditional" societies as timeless and unchanging (Said 1979; Fabian 1983).

Around the same time that post-modern anthropologists were critiquing the concepts of modernization theory, on another front, Marxist-inspired world-system theorists (Frank 1966; Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1982) attacked the basic premise of modernization theory. From a world-system perspective, it was naive to assume that all societies, by going through the process of industrialization and economic change, would make the same transition from "traditional" to "modern" society. Instead of becoming "modern," world-system theorists argued that many "traditional" societies were developing into "peripheral" nation-states, as the cancer known as capitalism spread from Europe to the rest of the world. One of the weaknesses of the world-system approach is that the persistence of "traditional" cultural forms are analytically overshadowed by the emergence of universal features in the "periphery," such as poverty and discrimination.

In the 1990s, new studies of consumption and transnational processes provide a more sophisticated framework for understanding the relevance of "traditional" or "local" cultural forms in the "modern" world. To begin, these scholars generally reject the belief that globalization is creating the homogenous "global village" that Marshall McLuhan first imagined in the 1960s (McLuhan 1964). Instead, they argue that the rise of global and transnational processes, which have accompanied the restructuring of global capitalism, is actually contributing towards the reproduction of cultural difference (Appadurai 1996; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). However, as some point out, the presentation of cultural difference is now taking on global forms (Miller 1995; Wilk 1995; Chatterjee 1993). For example, the staging of beauty pageants can now be found in almost all societies, yet the measuring of beauty and feminine talent remains heavily influenced by local standards (Cohen, Wilk and Stoeltje 1995).

Building from these insights, this article argues that the ways in which Kazaks are embracing foreign ideologies, purchasing foreign goods, *and* re-constructing their national identity can all be understood as the local consumption of global institutions. Although the Kazaks did not create these borrowed ideologies and objects, they do reproduce their cultural uniqueness by modifying these forms and imbuing them with their own contested meanings.

# Global Institutions and the Nation-State in Kazakhstan:

In Kazakhstan, the consumption of "modern" cultural forms and the revival of "traditional" cultural forms are occurring at both the national and the local levels. At the national level, the newly independent state of Kazakhstan is importing global models for organizing economic and political life. Given Kazakhstan's position within the post-Soviet world economy, the government has little choice but to adopt these models. With the waning of subsidies from Russia, the leaders of Kazakhstan have turned to international organizations, such as the IMF and the World Bank, for loans. Attached to these loans, there are a number of undisclosed "conditions" for restructuring economic and political institutions. This includes the privatization of state enterprises, the liberalization of prices, and the democratization of political institutions.

Although Kazakhstan is under pressure to adopt these "modern" global models, the government does have some liberty to choose which models they want to borrow and to decide how they want to modify them (Jacoby 1998). For example, the constitution of Kazakhstan calls for a powerful president, a multi-party system, and a two-chambered Parliament. As outside observers point out, the label "democratic" is often misused in order to gain international legitimacy (Gleason and Motyl 1997). Although the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev, is often perceived to be "more democratic" than the leaders of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, he has done a number of things in recent years to tarnish his international reputation. In 1995, for example, after dismissing the entire parliamentary body amidst allegations that one of the local elections was "undemocratic," Nazarbaev proceeded to establish a new constitution that greatly expanded his presidential powers (CSCE 1998).

Then, in early 1999, Nazarbaev held a presidential election nearly two years earlier than originally scheduled, leaving little time for his political opponents to organize effective campaigns. He managed to keep his greatest rival, his former Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin, out of the race on a technicality, a law that disqualifies anybody convicted of any offense from running for elective office. Sure enough, Mr. Kazhegeldin had recently been fined for attending an unregistered meeting of a political movement (Levine 1998). Despite an appeal from Kazhegeldin and complaints from international

observers, Kazhegeldin was banned from the race, and Nazarbaev was re-elected with over 80% of the vote.

The selective embrace of democracy is just one way that Kazakhstan is modifying global ideologies. The local modification of global ideologies can also be observed in President Nursultan Nazarbaev's discourse about his country's future economic development. In 1996, he made up his own rendition of the Asian Tiger concept used to describe the successful economic development of several Asian countries. Instead of joining the pack of Asian tigers, Nazarbaev has declared that Kazakhstan will soon become the leader of the "Central Asian Snow Leopards." By this, he means that the future development of Soviet Central Asia cannot possibly replicate the development of the Asian Tigers because the post-Soviet reality cannot be compared to post-colonial Asia. More specifically, the Central Asian countries already have some industry and the population is generally very educated. While this is true, Nazarbaev's choice of cats is rather interesting. Although snow leopards do indeed inhabit the mountains of Central Asia, the most striking characteristic of snow leopards, after their beauty, is their elusive nature. From a Euro-American perspective, at least, the snow leopard does not create the same image as a threatening, stalking tiger.

In addition to the pursuit of "democracy," the global model for the development of a "modern" nation-state ironically includes the deliberate invention of "tradition." In order to join the ranks of other "modern" nation-states, it is imperative that the government of Kazakhstan create a national identity that goes beyond the limitations set by Soviet nationality policy. This is especially challenging in Kazakhstan where a non-majority Kazak population (about 46%) is opposed by a significantly large Russian population (about 36%).<sup>1</sup> Although Soviet nationality policy is partially responsible for the formation of contemporary national identities within the Former Soviet Union, the nationalities' policy slogan "nationalist in form, socialist in content" ensured that these identities were both censored and superficial. In practice, the politicization of culture in the Soviet Union involved the repression of cultural elements that did not conform to Marxist ideology. For the Kazaks, this included attacks on their religion, their nomadic pastoral lifestyle, their tribal identities, and other "patriarchal-feudal" family customs. By excluding these elements of culture, the official dissemination of Kazak

national identity was reduced to those cultural elements that the Soviet government perceived to be relatively benign, such as Kazak food, dress and non-Islamic music.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1980s, under the rubric of *glasnost*, Kazak nationalists, and their counterparts in other Soviet republics, started to voice their criticisms regarding the cultural and economic colonization of the Kazak people. Their grievances included the reduced status of the Kazak language vis-à-vis Russian, the misrepresentation of Kazak history, and the environmental destruction and health problems wrought by nuclear testing, mismanaged irrigation, uranium mining and industrial production. These problems have continued to be important political issues in the post-Soviet period. So, in addition to developing new democratic institutions and restructuring the economy, the leaders of Kazakhstan are also engaged with the complicated task of re-imagining a more comprehensive Kazak national identity while maintaining inter-ethnic harmony.

The government of Kazakhstan has employed both global and Soviet strategies for creating a new national identity in the post-Soviet period. Adhering to the global model, Kazakhstan has already adopted a new national flag, printed a new national currency, produced new historical narratives, and promoted the celebration of new national holidays. In general, these developments have relied on symbols that stress a Kazak, not a multi-ethnic Kazakstani, identity. The Kazak flag, for example, displays an ornamental strip that clearly derives from Kazak decorative arts. Admittedly, other aspects of the flag, such as the light blue color, are not based on "authentic" Kazak symbols with long, distinct histories. But, perhaps more importantly, the Kazakstani flag does not contain any symbols associated with Russian culture, despite the presence of a large Russian population and political discourse on inter-ethnic harmony.

In general, the symbols used to represent the Kazak "past" tend to bypass the Soviet era, which is generally associated with the destruction of Kazak traditions. The new currency of Kazakhstan, the *tenge*, for example, adheres to the global model of placing a national hero on one side of each bill, yet each of the designated Kazak heroes comes from the pre-Soviet period.<sup>3</sup> The very same heroes are being honored for street and town names throughout the country, as names with Soviet connections are gradually weeded out. Eventually, as high inflation demanded greater

denominations, the supply of approved national heroes could not keep up with the demand for new denominations. So, the government decided to honor one of the selected heroes repeatedly on several different denominations (1, 500, 1000, and 2000 *tenge*). Moreover, the designation of this particular hero, the 10th century Islamic philosopher Abu al-Nasr al-Farabi (870 – 950 A.D.), as "Kazak" stretches the established history of the Kazak people back about five centuries.<sup>4</sup> The government's effort to extend national history corresponds to global experiences where history is manipulated to legitimate national identities.

In addition to a national past, the presence of a national language is also an important component of a national identity. In Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan, language politics are inextricably linked to national identity. Throughout the Soviet period, the use of Russian expanded at the expense of other languages, even though a number of languages, including Kazak, were sanctioned by the state. The state, for example, supported Kazak-language publications and media broadcasts. And, in most regions of Kazakhstan, parents could choose to send their children to either a Russian-language school or a Kazak-language school. In practice, however, many Kazak families preferred Russian-language schools because the quality of education was considered to be higher and Russian language skills were required for many jobs and for higher education outside of the republic. This has been a sore point among Kazak nationalists. In 1989, the Kazak writer Olzhas Suleimenov, whose own language abilities have been questioned because his books are all published in Russian, lamented that approximately forty percent of Kazak youth could not read in their native language (Olcott 1990). In the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the government has initiated several steps in order to reverse the impact of Soviet language policies and foster a gradual shift from Russian to Kazak in education and government.

Though distancing itself from the Russian language and culture, the Kazak nation has made a cautious attempt to identify with a broader Central Asian culture. Among other things, the Kazaks share a common Islamic faith and speak a related Turkic language with most of the indigenous peoples of Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> However, since government leaders want to emphasize the cultural uniqueness of the Kazaks and hope to maintain the separation of religion and politics, they generally choose to downplay the linguistic and religious ties, while accentuating other cultural similarities

with the Central Asian nationalities. For example, one of the "new" holidays, *Navryz*, is considered to be a non-Islamic, Central Asian New Year celebration. Banned by the Soviet government for decades, this holiday is now celebrated simultaneously in the other Central Asian republics. In every Kazak town, the main streets are lined with yurts, "national" dances are performed, and Central Asian dishes are served. Though ethnically neutral, other holidays, such as Independence Day, are also predominantly celebrated with Central Asian food, music and dance.

While the content of these holidays and celebrations is based on Kazak and Central Asian culture, the format of these events still reflects Soviet traditions, which itself has been influenced by global models. The legacy of Soviet rule is especially apparent when it comes to the large-scale productions commemorating the birthdays of deceased national heroes. In Soviet history, large birthday celebrations were quite common for national heroes, such as Lenin. Several celebrations have been organized in Kazakhstan since independence, most notably the 150th birthday celebration of the famous Kazak poet, Abai Kunanbayev. In 1995, after several months of local celebrations, the birthday event culminated when thousands of people gathered near Abai's native village in Semei province for a full day of festivities, including Kazak dishes, traditional games, and musical performances. On the surface, this event was an event of national significance, yet the Kazak media went to great lengths to point out that this was actually a global event. In addition to highlighting the presence of international guests in Semei province, the media repeatedly focused viewers' attention on the smaller, yet parallel, celebration of Abai's birthday in Paris, France. This apparent desire or need for international legitimacy helps explain why the newly independent state of Kazakhstan chooses to replicate global models in the first place.

#### Global Processes at the Local Level:

At the national level, the simultaneous consumption of modernity and tradition can be observed through the twin processes of state-building and nation-building. These same processes are being played out at the local level where Kazaks pursue "modernity" through the consumption of global images and foreign commodities and imagine "tradition" through the revival of national customs.

Beginning in 1994, I have conducted fifteen months of fieldwork in a small administrative town in Southern-Kazakhstan province.<sup>6</sup> Approximately 95% of the 8,000 residents are ethnically Kazak. The town is situated along the ancient Silk Road within a region that historically served as an intercultural conduit for goods and ideas. Through the rise of transoceanic travel in the 17th century and the tightening of political borders in the 20th century, the Silk Road region became more and more isolated from the rest of the world. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the multi-directional flow of images, ideas, goods and people across the border of Kazakhstan is steadily increasing.

In the town where I worked, I was able to observe several examples of these transnational flows. For better or worse, state censorship on foreign productions has been lifted and the Kazaks now have direct access to American and European lifestyles through films and television. In rural areas, access is still limited to a certain extent, however, since most rural families do not have a working television set and the local government limits the supply of electricity to several hours a day in order to cut expenses. Despite these obstacles, rural Kazaks have become very familiar with popular movie stars and television programs from the United States. Russian and Kazakstani television stations regularly broadcast foreign films and the local movie theater occasionally shows foreign films. In addition, videotapes of Hollywood films, dubbed in Russian and illegally copied, can be purchased in nearby cities or rented from town merchants.

As an American, I was frequently asked whether I had ever met or seen a number of famous stars, including Sylvester Stallone, Leonardo Di Caprio, and Larry Hagman (whose appearances on *Dallas* have been broadcast for the first time in the late 1990s).

In the post-Soviet period, there has also been a sharp increase in the number of global commodities. Throughout the Soviet period, the state tightly controlled speculative trade and international travel. Now that the restrictions on international travel have been lifted, it is fairly common for Kazakstani citizens to travel to nearby countries (including China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates). Once there, they purchase a small volume of consumer goods which they later resell in local Kazakstani markets. Through these activities, the Kazaks now have the opportunity to purchase the lifestyles they are

watching on television. The scope of transnational commerce has mushroomed in the past few years for two additional reasons: the production and distribution of "Soviet" goods has been severely disrupted by the fall of the Soviet Union and there have been few economic alternatives for the rising number of unemployed adults. Many unemployed Kazaks have turned to small-scale trade, and some travel abroad to do so. Through the efforts of these "shopping tourists" and their domestic counterparts, urban and rural Kazaks alike can now find a wide range of foreign goods, such as clothing, electronics, medicines and packaged foods.

Besides the "shopping tourists," many Kazakstani citizens are traveling abroad for other purposes. Among the villagers I encountered, at least a dozen had traveled outside of Kazakhstan within the past few years. Several college students, for example, received funding from the Turkish government or Islamic institutions to study at Turkish universities. Another college student traveled to Mongolia to participate in a wrestling competition. And, finally, the president of the private farmers' association and the leader of a local political party traveled to the United States to participate in two separate USIA-sponsored programs. All of these transnational processes demonstrate that this relatively small town in a relatively remote area of Kazakhstan is connected to the global world in many different ways.

### Getting Married in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan:

Within Kazakhstan, the community I worked with is considered to be more "traditional" than other communities because of its ethnic purity, its proximity to Uzbekistan, and its rural location. Assuming that an ethnographer like myself would only be interested in "authentic" traditions, urban Kazaks in Almaty regularly reassured me that the rural Kazaks in the south have preserved a number of Kazak "traditions," including wedding traditions, that have been destroyed or defiled in other regions. Although certain elements of rural wedding events may appear to be "traditional," the process of getting married in Kazakhstan changed throughout the Soviet period in reaction to new policies, new trends and new commodities. In the post-Soviet period, marriage and wedding traditions continue to change in ways that reflect larger global processes and national identity politics. Rural Kazak families, for example, have quickly incorporated expensive and prestigious "imported"

goods, as well as new national "traditions," into these events. Ironically, families are able to acquire cultural capital by adding both "modern" and "traditional" elements to their wedding feasts. And, as the social stratification process intensifies, wedding events provide a valuable barometer for measuring the status, wealth and power of different families. Thus, the study of Kazak weddings provides a perfect lens for observing how rural Kazaks are simultaneously embracing modernity and reconstructing tradition.

In the rural regions of southern Kazakhstan, the majority of marriages take place after youths reach the legal age of 17. Women are usually married by the age of 23, while men on average marry a few years later. On the one hand, many young couples attended school together or "dated" (*birge zhuru*, literally "to walk together") and thus knew each other very well before marriage. Once they decide to get married, their parents may formally "arrange" a marriage, or the youths may decide to stage a "kidnap"-style elopement, where the bride is ritually stolen by the groom. On the other hand, some youths enter marriages with a spouse they do not know very well. For example, in some extreme cases, a girl of a marriageable age is forcibly "kidnapped" by a groom she has never met.

Regardless of how the marriage comes about, a new marriage is a huge cause for celebration. Before and after the marriage is official, a number of separate events take place, including a pair of intimate in-law feasts (*qudalyq*), a bride's "face-opening" ceremony (*betashar*), and a sumptuous feast hosted by the groom's family (*uilenu toi*). All of these wedding events entail conspicuous displays of wealth and generosity, symbolically represented through food and gifts. During the in-law feasts, one set of in-laws hosts a small group of 6-10 "in-laws" for a day of feasting and gift exchange. At the face-opening ceremony, the new bride is ritually presented to the groom's relatives for the first time. And, during the large wedding feast, the groom's family sponsors a large feast attended by 100-800 guests, relatives and friends of both sides. If the marriage is "arranged," there may be two large feasts, one at the bride's house and one at the groom's house. The order of these events varies depending on whether it is an "arranged" marriage (*quda tusu*) or a marriage by abduction (*alyp qashu*) (Werner 1997).

In the post-Soviet period, the process of getting married and the celebration of new

marriages have been transformed in ways that reflect both global and national influences. One of the many changes involves the preservation of wedding memories. For decades, wedding events were documented through black-and-white photography. Shortly after VCRs and videocameras entered Kazakstani markets in the early 1990s, several local entrepreneurs purchased videocameras and started to videotape family celebrations for a fee. Within a few years, as poorer families started to imitate the new habits of the elite, the old practice of black-and-white photography quickly disappeared. In 1995, the use of videotaping escalated to a new level after one of the local state farm directors mounted several television screens on a pole in the central area of the feasting grounds. He used these screens to present live video footage of the feast events to his guests. Although this is not nearly as widespread as the use of videotaping, it has become a standard practice for the village elite.

Foreign music, food and gifts have also permeated Kazak weddings. Although these events are dominated by pop styles of Kazak music, it is not uncommon for the hired musicians to play tapes of European or American music while they are taking a break. However, the audience clearly attaches their own meanings to these songs. In 1994, when the Beatles were very popular in Kazakstan, I attended a wedding feast for a member of a young pop music group. During the feast, the DJ played the song "Yesterday." I told one of the groom's female friends that Americans also like this song but would not consider it appropriate for a wedding because of the first line, "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away, now it seems as if they're here to stay." My Kazak friend replied that the lyrics of the song didn't really matter to her because she and her friends just really liked the Beatles.

Foreign foods are also becoming more common at wedding events, as transnational trade has brought a variety of new packaged cookies, candies, and soft drinks. The display and consumption of large quantities of food is a core element during each of the wedding events. At the large wedding feasts, where there are several hundred guests, as many as four or five hot meals will be served in addition to an array of breads, salads, fruits and appetizers. Initially, the new imported goods were incorporated into smaller events, such as in-law parties, where there may be as few as 40 guests. Most families simply could not afford the added cost of incorporating these relatively expensive goods into the large wedding

feast. While imported cookies and candies have not yet been added to the feast foods, there has been a gradual shift in the case of drinks. In 1995, when I completed my dissertation fieldwork, villagers were just starting to incorporate powdered drink mixes from Turkey into their feasts, in addition to the more standard selection of Russian vodka, cognac, fermented horse and camel milk, and bottled water. Some families cleverly cut expenses by using just enough powder to color the water but not enough to change the taste.

In 1995, there were a number of generic cola products in the local bazaar, but it was hard to find Pepsi-Cola or Coca-Cola. By the time I returned in 1998, one-liter bottles of Coca-Cola and Fanta from Tashkent, Uzbekistan were ubiquitous at wedding feasts. Meanwhile, the generic colas were nowhere to be found and the powdered drink mixes were no longer served at large feasts. Although the opening of a Coca-Cola factory in Tashkent has reduced the cost of cola, this is still a very expensive item for rural families to serve to several hundred guests. Families who are marrying off their children have accepted this additional burden in part because they know that guests discuss and compare the quality and quantity of food served. To maintain or improve their social status, the host household seeks to provide as much food as it can possibly afford (with the help of short-term loans from relatives and friends). Since foreign cookies, candies and cola products are considered to be expensive, hosts who serve these are socially rewarded for their generosity.

In addition to incorporating foreign foods, the rural elite in particular are able to gain cultural capital by exchanging expensive "imported" gifts, including U.S. dollars, at wedding events. Similar to foods, the objects of gift exchange are used to display and negotiate differences in social status. When a couple marries, there are multiple levels of gift exchange. This includes the objects exchanged in a girl's dowry, the objects presented by guests to the host household; and the objects exchanged by each set of in-laws at the two separate in-law parties. For in-law gifts and dowry items, the exchange of imported goods is becoming very common. Imported goods - highly coveted but rarely accessible in the past - are now expected by those who are more affluent. In many respects, these goods are filling a niche previously occupied by certain Soviet factories that were renowned for producing high-quality goods.



In rural Kazakhstan, women are the cultural experts when it comes to gift exchange, as they are the ones who remember gifts exchanged in the past and prepare goods for in-law gifts and girls' dowries. In the post-Soviet period, they know that the presence of "imported" clothing has become an important criterion in the overall assessment of the gifts' value. After inspecting the gifts her neighbor was preparing to give to her in-laws, one woman told me that it was unfortunate that her neighbor did not have the financial means to include more imported clothing. On another day, I watched as a different woman advised her friend that a Soviet-produced coat was not a suitable in-law gift for the bride's wealthy maternal aunt. Since time was running out, she suggested that her friend give a hundred-dollar bill instead. Similar thoughts go into the preparation of dowry items. A girl's dowry, for example, would ideally include a winter coat and several silk dresses from Turkey, a factory-made rug from Belgium or Pakistan, dishes from Iran, and furniture from Europe, in addition to a number of domestic goods.

The incorporation of these "modern" elements, however, is just one way that rural Kazaks use wedding events to gain prestige in their community. Ironically, the same people who are serving and exchanging global commodities are re-constructing Kazak "traditions" which were abandoned in the Soviet period. In some ways, this process is directly related to the process of nation-building at the national level. For example, the state has gone to great efforts to sponsor the publication of new books on the history, traditions and genealogy of the Kazaks. Additionally, state and independent newspapers alike regularly contain articles which describe in detail the way that Kazaks traditionally performed certain rituals. In many instances, these articles include interviews with elderly, rural Kazaks since it is generally believed that they have better knowledge of national traditions. Some of the rural Kazaks I spoke to expressed great pride in their role as culture-bearers, while admitting that they too do not know enough about their cultural traditions. To learn more, they are also reading the new books. Thus, at the local level, these books and articles serve as references for the Kazaks as they collectively search for "authentic" traditions, refresh their memories, and forge a new post-Soviet identity.

One of the most interesting developments in the post-Soviet period is the reinstitution and reinterpretation of the "traditional" arranged

marriage. According to Russian and Kazak ethnographers, the vast majority of marriages in the pre-Soviet period were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. Occasionally, a bride was kidnapped as a means to retaliate against an enemy tribe, or alternatively, as a way to punish a girl's father who was demanding excessive bridewealth. In the late 1920s, the Soviet state, in an attempt to rectify gender inequalities, banned arranged marriages and kidnapped marriages as two of the many "crimes against custom." The people I encountered insist that arranged marriages became practically non-existent after the Second World War. However, a revised version of marriage by abduction (*alyq qashu*) actually became the dominant path to marriage in the post-war period. In the Soviet and post-Soviet period, many but not all of these kidnappings involve the woman's prior consent (but not her parents' consent).

This is all changing in the post-Soviet period, where local practices are directly influenced by the nation-building process, which in turn involves the adaptation of a global model. In urban and rural settings throughout southern Kazakhstan, the educated elite in particular are putting their new knowledge to practice as their grown children reach the age of marriage. After reading about their national "traditions," they have adopted the concept of "arranged marriage" (*quda tusu*) to describe a new path to marriage which combines both "modern" and "traditional" elements. On the modern side, the bride and groom decide on their own to get married, although their parents may play a role by instigating some introductions. After the youths decide that they would like to get married, their parents follow what they consider to be the "traditions" for arranging a marriage. The groom's family sends a delegation to the bride's house, where the two sets of in-laws discuss the marriage, the bridewealth and the feast arrangements. During this event, the future mother-in-law ritually welcomes her future daughter-in-law by presenting her with a pair of gold earrings. Although this form of marriage is relatively new, it has gained a lot of currency among the local elite who now judge marriage by abduction to be a vastly inferior path to marriage. The dichotomy between the two types of marriages became further entrenched this past summer when the President of Kazakhstan himself arranged a marriage for his daughter to the son of the President of Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, beyond these attitudinal shifts, there has been a shift in the celebration of wedding festivities. In addition to the customary wedding



feast at the groom's house, arranged marriages also entail an equally lavish feast at the bride's house (*qyz uzatu toi*, literally "departure of the bride feast"), which culminates when the wailing bride departs for her new home. The addition of a second feast provides a material advantage to the local elite, who generally receive so many gifts from their guests when they sponsor a feast that they are able to profit from this expensive endeavor. In other words, they gain in terms of material capital and cultural capital.

### Conclusions:

In conclusion, the transformations taking place in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, at both the national and the local levels, are useful for reinterpreting the dichotomy between "tradition" and "modernity." In the case of Kazakhstan, the consumption of "modernity" and the imagination of "tradition" do not represent two distinct trajectories. Instead, these two processes can both be understood as the local consumption of global forms. The ways in which global models are adapted in local settings, such as Kazakhstan, varies widely and thus serves to reinforce the existence of cultural distinctions within a larger "global village."

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The estimated number of Kazaks and Russians in Kazakhstan varies widely, depending on the source. Nationalist-oriented demographers claim that the Kazaks now represent more than 50% of the current population. This number diverges significantly from data based on the 1989 census which designates 39.5% Kazak and 37.6% Russian (Allworth 1994: 600-601; Gleason 1997: 50-51). Several factors are cited to explain the increased number of Kazaks. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, significant percents of several ethnic groups, including Russians, Germans and Jews, have emigrated out of Kazakhstan. And, a modest number of Kazak families have immigrated to Kazakhstan from Mongolia, Afghanistan, and other countries. Finally, although the birthrates for both Russians and Kazaks have declined throughout the 1990s, the fertility rate for Kazaks is higher. After the next census is conducted, it will be clear exactly how much these factors have affected the ethnic composition of Kazakhstan.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Levin's *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God* (1996) offers many useful insights for understanding the cultural politics of Soviet Central Asia, with special focus on Uzbek music.

<sup>3</sup> The new currency was introduced on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1993. From 1991 to 1993, Kazakhstan remained in the "ruble zone." By 1993, the Central Bank of Russia indirectly forced Kazakhstan to establish a new currency, by requiring collateral in the form of gold and hard currency (Gleason 1997: 140-41).

<sup>4</sup> Although the Abai encyclopedia (Myrzakhmetov 1995: 579-80), for example, describes al-Farabi as a "great Kazak scholar," other sources refer to al-Farabi as a Turk (Pines 1970: 794-801). Since historians of Central Asia trace the origins of the Kazak people to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Olcott 1987:3-9), it is very unlikely that al-Farabi considered himself to be a "Kazak."

<sup>5</sup> Among the indigenous groups of Central Asia, there are both non-Muslims (i.e. the Bukharan Jews) and non-Turkic speaking peoples (i.e. the Tajiks).

<sup>6</sup> Dissertation research was conducted for a total of thirteen months between March 1994 and August 1995. A subsequent visit of two months took place during the summer of 1998.

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