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KOLKHOZES INTO SHIRKATS:

A Local Label for Managed Pastoralism in Uzbekistan

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Executive summary

This paper, based on research conducted in 1998, aims to describe and explain elements of Qoraqol agropastoralism in Uzbekistan and the uniquely hybridized society of transitional Soviet-era kolkhozes in this part of Central Asia. It describes the history of socialist management of livestock pastoralism in the central Uzbekistani province of Navoi, and considers changes that have been introduced by Uzbekistan's post-independence state, especially the attempt to replace kolkhozes by the ostensibly more indigenous and "leaner" form of enterprise known as the *shirkat*. It goes on to consider the predicament of the people living through this transformation, and the unique economic and environmental problems that have accompanied it, and analyzes the prevailing local outlook toward capitalist development.

This essay aims to describe and explain elements of a little studied sphere of Uzbekistani culture—namely, its *Qoraqol* agropastoralism and the uniquely hybridized society of transitional Soviet-era kolkhozes in this part of Central Asia. I construct the work out of four main parts. My aim is to outline recent historical changes with regard to the socialist management or over-lordship of livestock pastoralism in the central Uzbekistani province of Navoi, most of which lies in the Qyzyl Qum (Central Asia's second major desert). I then consider the significance of the state-invented *shirkat*, a kind of leaner version of the kolkhoz fused with artful notions about a “return” to indigenous values based on cooperative living. The *shirkat* constitutes the latest phase of managed pastoralism.

In the section following this I discuss the relative difficulties of researching the economic and social organization of Uzbek and Tajik semi-nomadic society¹ in this part of Central Asia, which can be traced to two sources: (1) the paucity of informative data in accessible or common sources and (2) informants' seeming inability to recall this fundamental aspect of their pre-Soviet ancestors' culture. In the end, I consider the postsocialist predicament of the people living under such political conditions and attempt to analyze the prevailing local outlook toward capitalist development along with the unique economic and environmental problems they face in a newly non-socialist world.

On separate trips during the winter and summer of 1998 I conducted baseline ethnographic research among shepherding families in one of Central Asia's primary Qoraqol sheep-raising territories.² I served as part of a research team for a multi-year development project that aims to work with Central Asian academics, livestock officials, and shepherds in order to increase the productivity and resourcefulness of animal products and a sustainable ecosystem.

The peremptory heart of socialist fulfillment

Recent books on the Soviet Union have introduced some of the more misguided instances of economic planning for industries centered around salmon on the Pacific coast (Grant 1995) and reindeer and walrus in the Far North (Slezkine 1994). Central Asia, too, could not escape the capriciousness of counting sheep. Foragers of the sea and the arboreal forests, herders of the tundra, and pastoralists of the

high mountain valleys and windswept deserts became instant plan-conscious socialists. In time, some phases and industries of the planned economy worked better than others.

In Central Asian pastoralist communities, much like other places in the postsocialist realm where forms of rational use and optimum output models were applied, not only were plan targets and yearly quotas imposed but the overarching ideological position or demand was to make sure that each successive year brought increases in the number of ewes, tons of wool, tons of mutton and numbers of lamb pelts. As we know only too well from the Chinese and Soviet cases, much of these data were falsified to satisfy the supposed demands of the leadership and party bigwigs. Still, the goal of quantitative increases in the absence of harmful consequences to the environment and to human health, cannot be judged harshly on its own. What I mean is that the masses often benefited from increased production because it brought in increased products of the socialist “redistributive” network to the localities.

Today, the conditions are quite otherwise, as Humphrey and Sneath correctly indicated for Inner Asian pastoralist communities: “With the end (or reduction) of obligatory quotas supplied by herders to the state there has been a broadly corresponding reduction (or end) of guaranteed state wages and services to the herders (1992:6). Uzbek shepherds have been hit hard by the decline of socialism and with it the decline of price controls and export markets for their products, to say nothing of the virtual collapse of the internal national market with increasing underemployment and impoverishment.

Many would argue that such past socialist planning goals pitted the state against the shepherds. To some extent this is true. Whenever the direct producers cannot exercise their own decision-making powers, whenever their opinions and input count for next to nothing, it would be difficult to argue that their interests were counted first. On the other hand, unless one takes a completely anti-Communist position without allowing for an iota of agency on the part of the shepherds and the non-shepherd but non-power-holding local population, then we must reckon with the viewpoints of the local bureaucracy. Government leaders and collective farm professionals claimed to urge greater production and greater output so that the local population would benefit, so that they would live better than had ever been possible prior to the socialist system. Certainly it does not require a cynic to know that the upper echelon

always stole and made sure the greatest good was supplied to itself first and foremost; and clearly even the least educated, most isolated shepherds are completely cognizant of this unofficial Soviet mission³.

Background of managed pastoralism in Navoi Province

Pasture degradation is rarely a sudden event. Nevertheless, the process of degradation in Uzbekistan has been accelerated both by long-term drought (since 1995) and by overgrazing of land adjacent to shepherds' homesteads. The toll from the meteorological hardship alone has led to devastating declines in meat production and in the overall number of sheep, drops of about 50% and 35% respectively since 1995. Although there is good evidence to show that great environmental harm was caused by other Central Asian centrally planned agricultural projects, such as cotton farming, one should be cautious in blaming today's problems connected to livestock agriculture on the *ancien regime*. In fact a recent theoretical orientation offered by Humphrey and Sneath (1996:1-11) is that long-established patterns of Inner Asian (Siberian and Mongolian) nomadic pastoralism based on socialist collectivist models may prove more sustainable than market-oriented approaches. It may have been a tad early for newly independent postsocialist countries to throw out the baby with the bath water – or policies with the politics. Of course, in Uzbekistan, I argue that it is only the policies that have been tossed out.

Although Khrushchev convinced himself that that the USSR became a “paradise” in the 1960s (1971:574), that developed socialism had been reached, the Central Asians with whom I've discussed this topic contradict his view. Instead, they point out that during Brezhnev's era people lived more comfortably and carefree – materially – than at any other time in their and their parents' lives. And, specifically, in the Nurota region of what was Samarqand province, which became Navoi province after 1980, shepherds, scholars, and farm managers agree that changes in the rational-use planning and administration of pastures, water sources, and kolkhoz facilities paved the way for the Qoraqol industry to attain new heights of socialist profitability.

Although substantial changes had been part of an ongoing process in the Qoraqol industry from the early 1930s – when villages were converted into kolkhozes and the great breeding areas of Bukhara

began to send their animals and experts into Kazakhstan and other parts of the USSR (Shirinsky 1975:2) – perhaps the most fundamental change in the methods of animal pasturing and care came during the Brezhnev era. About 1970, livestock experts from Samarqand’s Qoraqol Institute devised what they called the “System X” method of efficient pasture use and maximization of nutritional resources for the herds.

System X was based on the notion of rotating animal herds like crops, supposedly to maximize efficient uses of pastures, fodder, and water above all. Along with raising productivity of the kolkhozes and, consequently, raising living standards for kolkhozniks, a major goal of System X was to preserve the industry by carefully consolidating use and consumption of the bounties of the local ecosystem.

Succinctly stated, the method operated on the basis of a tightly regulated enclosure system whereby the lambs criss-crossed from one range or pen-like area (*zagon*) to the next, creating an X-like pattern. The driving movements were determined by augmenting seasonal nutritional availability and requirements. For example, during the harsh winter months it made the most sense to keep the young sheep closest to the homesteads where they could be penned indoors and given special and healthful fodder. In addition to making the shepherding lifestyle less arduous, another key idea was to rest certain grassland areas for successful regeneration, usually after having been continuously utilized for 5-6 days.

Within several years of its inception, however, this model began to break down, especially over the issue of creating more wells and purchasing the pumps and piping needed to bring ground water from nearby mountain ranges. The academics worked it out, members of various ministries approved it all, but System X was rejected or sabotaged (depending on one’s point of view) by the human forces directly involved in production – the kolkhoz managers and the shepherds. It didn’t work because shepherds began to ignore it. But why would they ignore a labor regimen that seemed to make good sense?

The one part of the system that apparently was not so rationally worked out concerned the setting up of wells. Instead of digging three as commissioned by a particular pedigree breeding establishment (*gosplemzavod*), for example, local officials ordered only one. When shepherds, as a result, could not gain ready access to water, they simply circumvented the system by cutting through nearby cotton and

grain fields to provide their animals with water.⁴ Contradictions were built into this management and command system of livestock pastoralism. The farm leaders, known as *rais(es)* in Central Asia, wanted to cut corners and save money for a variety of reasons, which included worrying about having sufficient funds to pay the *kolkhozniks* after the farm's overall surplus budget was determined. Furthermore, many people did not hesitate to keep some annual outlays for themselves no matter what the allocation spending requirements were.

As for the shepherds, they did not actively protest or resist; they simply cut through wiring, or fed and watered their animals where and when they saw fit. In such wide-open and wide-ranging territory, it proved extremely difficult for scientific professionals to monitor and regulate the shepherds' independent activities. Does this demonstrate that shepherds did not buy into the concept of abstract principles about the good of the whole or collective betterment, no matter how sensible or environmentally conscious some of the System X planning may actually have been? Not necessarily. The point is that they did not consider it as such because of problems ensuring that their animals were well watered. The Samarqand-based managed pastoralist plan failed only to the extent that the shepherds did not support enacting the plans over the long term because of their very own local leaders.

If in Creed and Wedel's understanding, the socialist state was so obsessed with allocation as a function of politics controlling the economy (1997:255), then here we have an example of a local level "obsession with allocation." This is owed in part to the fact that rational planning was not convincing enough for the local apparatus to invest its energy and resources for a new phase of even more tightly managed pastoralist production. This case represents, I think, a clash between two higher branches of the government bureaucracy, which resulted in a kind of defeat for the national scientific cadre at the hands of local farming officials, and perhaps proved detrimental to long-term Qoraqol pastoralism in Uzbekistan. Rather than trying to figure out what might have been a better outcome for the system, however, we as scholars should perhaps investigate different questions. When we encounter cases such as this, we might better consider other examples of failed socialist policies in order to tell us why and

when an arguably dictatorial state lose its ability to manage or transform major sectors of its own planned economy.

Market in form, non-democratic in content

One thesis holds that there is barely a qualitative change in leadership structure and in the nature of independent space among actors of the local economy with regard to Soviet-style socialism and independent Uzbekistani market reform *transitionalism*.⁵ Why this should be so has much to do with the idea that the national leadership saves itself precious funds by not strongly supporting unproductive sectors and also effectively strangles local bureaucrats whom it dislikes by diminishing their potential for success.

The former part of this equation is more or less the argument advanced by Ilkhamov (1998:5). The Uzbekistani state still stands to benefit from the kolkhozes by not supporting agriculture (no direct budget funding), and by, at the same time, controlling agriculture (using economic levers to “maximize pumping of export resources from agriculture,” in Ilkhamov’s estimation). In an absolute sense, there is an ability to be on your own and there is a freedom from collective farm and brigade method animal production quotas (albeit every enterprise still arranges contracts with individual shepherds on this score, and all enterprises that grow wheat must fulfill a central plan specified in Tashkent in terms of metric tonnage). But this is not the case when it comes to making money – that is, hardly anyone is making adequate money, which makes a mockery of economic independence or freedom at the individual household level.

Most shepherds still have relatively little political or economic autonomy in their daily lives, although the vast majority who answered our survey claimed they were freer in their economic activities today than ten years ago.⁶ We think the shepherds mean that they have more power to make decisions about how they can earn a living based on the utilization of their animals and animal products, and that they may, hypothetically, own as many animals as they can afford.⁷ Curiously, the vast majority of our shepherd interviewees (+70%) also asserted that they would prefer to stay with the kolkhoz as their socio-

economic form of organization. I still harbor doubts that their responses about being freer really had much to do with our own thinking as we designed the questionnaire, and I suspect further that many told us what they thought they *should* say in our semi-official presence.

Moreover, as we must acknowledge, the system of Soviet-instituted managed pastoralism has meant a steady and increasing decline in individual or collective mobility. Uniquely developed methods of sedentarization occurred under socialism, but sedentarization of nomads itself corresponds to worldwide trends since the Second World War. A constant problem for sedentarized pastoralists is that the degree of pasture degradation or outright loss of pasture is usually proportional to the decrease of mobility. And the more that fodder crops and heavy machinery are introduced into this environment the more pastures are lost, as well (Humphrey and Sneath 1996:4).

Decisions about such control processes have good and bad consequences for pastoral economies and conscious and unconscious effects on social organization. For example, Uzbek pastoralism has always been of a mixed variety – including crop agriculture – both prior to and during Soviet power.⁸ While the Soviet state no doubt eagerly anticipated a shift in identifiable loyalties to a larger ethnicity and to the nation state, the accelerated sedentarization that supported collectivization concurrently realigned and in many cases strengthened ties based on village society, encompassing genealogical links and lineage organization. Power relationships reconstituted themselves through a socialistic, Party-rule idiom and ethos, but the players tended to reproduce long-established forms of political association based on that older social organization. As Eickelman sketches the affinities of Egyptian bedouin (nomadic Arabs of North Africa and the Middle East) for Nasserist collective arrangements (owing to their economic advantages over the historical pattern of herding livelihoods), it should come as no surprise that a sort of parallel case, that of 1930s Central Asia, was also rooted in the creation of more stable and secure institutions of a very powerful state (1981:72).

The parallel to Egypt has limits. Although rural Uzbeks, whether producing commodities such as cotton or prized *Qorakul* pelts, have long been integrated into a global economy, the peasantry and the shepherds were never really cognizant of changes in the world capitalist markets; they rarely if ever had

any idea what world market prices were for their goods, and thus could not tell how fair their wages were, based on such prices. Even most agricultural managers were in the dark about such markets and the profits their government made. Nationalist Arab socialism enabled the poorest *fellahin* to be well informed of the vagaries of capitalist market fluctuations and its effects on the sale of prime Egyptian cotton during the mid-1950s (Lerner 1958:227). Soviet socialism frequently tried to create an illusion of autarky that made the economy impermeable to the scheming West.⁹

The *shirkat* as a model of reform and an advance toward the market?

The activities and changes brought on by Communist and post-Communist reforms have moved with the rapidity of tectonic shifts in the Uzbek countryside. The major march forward since 1990 consisted in the break-up of the sovkhoses, which meant that the state did not want to directly control farming enterprises. Uzbekistan presents several unique obstacles to any sort of radical reforms: (1) the population density is over 50 people/km² (compare this with just over 6 people/km² in Kazakhstan); (2) there are only 0.17 hectares of arable land/inhabitant (compare this to 0.67 hectare/inhabitant in Russia); and (3) only 10% of the entire country's land is arable, with fully 65% of the population living in rural areas (Karimov 1998:71). So to simply make all of the farming and herding people smallholders of land would call upon the proverbial magic wand.

Nevertheless, in efforts to prepare the citizens for the changeover to the market, the government seems to be most adroit at politico-economic sleight of hand. One sees signs throughout the countryside for agricultural enterprises with labels such as shares societies, joint stock companies, co-operatives. In local newspapers and television much is made of real estate auctions and the sale of land for private use. Agricultural banks advertise credit and loans for the agricultural sector, and 1998 was named the Year of the *Dehqon* (Peasant). Few peasants or shepherds, however, seem to know very much about any of the labels, opportunities or services just mentioned. And when better informed kolkhozniks understand the concepts, very few have any experience with the elements of market reform other than their own attempts

at cockroach capitalism, which I define as re-selling imported goods at town and country marketplaces. This reflects more a subsistence standard of living rather than promising free market opportunities.¹⁰

The state is, if anything, retarding its own claims to transitionalist reform. My contention is that the economy's sector of managed pastoralism damages the ability of pastoralists to enable themselves to recover and thrive in the wake of drought and Soviet collapse. I now discuss the *shirkat* or co-operative, cautioning readers that my conclusions are preliminary, for considerably more fieldwork remains to be done.

Today about half of Uzbekistan's farming enterprises remain kolkhozes. Since 1993 a process to convert kolkhozes into *shirkats* began, and just as I ended my summer fieldwork in Navoi, a provincial decree was issued to speed up such conversions and do away with kolkhozes altogether within a year. The *shirkat*, in essence, has become a dismembered kolkhoz with fewer people in the administrative apparatus and fewer people involved in the productive work. In general, the spatial dimensions of *shirkats* are much smaller, too, so that a typical Qoraqol kolkhoz, which might have consisted in 65 pastures and 85 homesteads, has been shrunk under the *shirkat* arrangement to 20 pastures and 30 homesteads. The reduction in scale is supposed to make all commercial and social relations among management, shepherds, and outside markets or enterprises more direct, and the state naturally assumes much less control, including financial support for these newer agricultural institutions.

This new form apparently finds a historical precedent in a kind of informal institution known as *sherikat*¹¹ (*Istoriia Uzbekskoi SSR* 1956:113). These co-ops emerged when poor peasant farmers in the Ferghana valley (eastern Uzbekistan) banded together, sharing tools, animals, land, and the fruits of harvests (often involving the pooling of resources among neighbors and members of extended families based on patrilineages); they were not instituted by the state. I have yet to come across the existence of such cooperatives among pastoralists of the Bukharan khanate in the historical literature.

The sociologist Alisher Ilkhamov recently adumbrated some of the post-Soviet developments in terms of Uzbekistan's agriculture. In a revealing section on *shirkats* he discusses how they are viewed as a community company or association, saying they encompass family and *mahalla*

(neighborhood/community) properties, along with property of cooperatives, rental and collective enterprises. Ilkhamov goes on to say that usually the kolkhoz becomes a broken-up structural unit, with *shirkat* comprising a number of “fraternal” brigades (1998:5). This cooperative activity started as far back as the perestroika era. Furthermore, the author writes that the move came about logically, since a degree of private enterprise – veiled private enterprise – was a mainstay of the livestock kolkhozes.

But Ilkhamov goes on to make a bold distinction between today’s strictly agricultural versus livestock *shirkats*. The former, he claims, basically follow the kolkhoz model or the early Soviet-era co-op (late 1920s-1930s). The livestock *shirkats*, he contends, exhibit a greater degree of entrepreneurialism – economic freedom. Perhaps there is some validity to this for cattle collectives, but I am not too sure of whose entrepreneurialism or economic freedom he is talking about when it comes to the particular case of the Qoraqol shepherds I worked among in Navoi. I will now try to explain.

The *shirkat* is not only not essentially different from the kolkhoz but has so far failed to deliver any sort of largesse to the shepherding/pastoralist population, or to provide realistic economic freedoms to promote accessible or feasible entrepreneurialism (*pace* Ilkhamov 1998). The *shirkat* was partly invented to assuage the peasant’s or shepherd’s sense that s/he was still stuck in the Soviet past. How could one be a free Uzbek living in an independent republic on a Soviet-created and named enterprise? The terminology was changed and the state has tried to instill the idea that shepherds are more on their own, with less bureaucratic interference and no compulsion to fulfill state orders. Here was a way to take a bite out of bureaucratic inefficiency. And there were surely other reasons for the break up of the Soviet-style collectives that have not been laid bare quite so explicitly. Perhaps one such reason is a strategy of statecraft aimed at weeding out those bureaucrats the national leadership does not want; or, maybe, the leadership effectively sends a message in this way to certain enterprise heads, proclaiming that “we” will simply do away with the enterprise you once headed. In another era one would have called these acts purges.

The transition from controlled agro-pastoralism to more managed agro-pastoralism seems not to be taking place, and in fact a reverse process may already be under way.¹² The difference this time

around is that the state may be allowing local managers to exercise a kind of unchecked control, for which I would like to provide evidence.

Because the local leaders of the new *shirkats* often find themselves having to barter their animals with outside enterprises not merely to pay their members, but also to maintain the upkeep of these mostly dilapidated farms, they tend to use the sheep already given to shepherds in their transactions. What this means is the shepherds then have no opportunity to make money from these sheep, as they would have under “normal” kolkhoz circumstances, since they are paid in quantity. When the local management uses the animals to bargain for building and roofing materials, spare machinery parts, fuel, and livestock medications (increasingly), the shepherds and their families are not really gaining much at all on an individual basis.

These bartering arrangements are not necessarily typical of the socialist period. What the *shirkats* and kolkhozes have to do to survive and help (sometimes) their constituents is to barter away their own livestock products. Nevertheless, the bargaining and negotiations usually take place among Nurotans, rather than local farm leaders journeying to industrial centers to arrange barter-type contracts; though somewhere along the line of course this is what has to happen.

What is being created is a system where at least two distinct branches of the local economy (separated by ecological zones among other factors) are dealing or trading essentially the same products. Those who are the direct producers (kolkhoz managers) sell or barter livestock, and those to whom animals were bartered either “re-sell” or barter the animals again for their own particular needs. If the animals are being used to satisfy more than one branch of the national economy for numerous trade and bartering purposes with a potent exchange value, then we might even see the products of the pastoralist branch of the economy functioning like money. Livestock, of course, fulfill this function for pastoralists across the globe, but now in central Uzbekistan, with its cash-poor post-Soviet economy, it also seems to play a role beyond the domestic/household or pastoralist mode of production sphere.

As Humphries claims is characteristic of bartering economies, “... barter tends to link micro-economies, ..., dissimilar from one another” (1992:107). She talks about it being a feature of the regional

economy, which is what I suggest when I restrict it to “central Uzbekistan.” She says it almost has to be “a crucial arena for ethical action.”

In the Central Asian and wider socialist context, trading was predicated on cunning and subterfuge. To bargain or barter well requires excellent skills and detailed knowledge of what constitutes quality when one is exchanging something. Verdery pointed out several years ago that industrial barter characterized exchange activities among many large enterprises in central European socialist countries and the USSR. She spoke of the situation with regard to hoarded supplies because of over-production in factories once managers ended up with more of a product than they needed. This gave rise to exchange of commodities with other firms for shortages at one’s own firm. Barter or exchange, as Verdery says, became a “crucial component of behavior” in socialism’s central planning system (1995:222). Socialism was an economy-of-shortage situation, but it was still not so much a function of poverty or severe economic disadvantage. The socialist economy of shortage concerned the way the system efficiently functioned, based on features such as hoarding and worker theft.¹³

How do today’s barter arrangements differ from those of years gone by? First, the agricultural enterprises are probably not bargaining from a position of strength, given the fall in commodity livestock prices, given how they lament the hardships, and given the fact that managers declare things are substantially worse than before. Without production, the enormous drop in pastoralist product prices, and the plunging decline in external trade (especially w/ Russia), the presence and practice of hoarding may be greatly reduced from the situation that obtained just 10-12 years ago.

Moreover, for those inclined to argue that the shepherds can now freely sell or barter their own animals, the reality is not so simple. In order to get animals to market, or to get middle-men to come to the shepherds, a lot has to be paid out by the shepherds. When they travel to regional markets for example, there are a host of legal and not-so-legal taxes and registration fees to pay; in some cases outright bribes are taken to get 100 head, for instance, from one political province into the next. This takes place at checkpoint crossings when the animals are “inspected” by provincial veterinary authorities.

The lack of state support coupled with a dual inability to access markets and find favorable markets for goods account for growing difficulties among shepherds. There is now an increasingly domesticated mode of production, a more subsistence-based economy that seems to be the major developing failure of the expiration of Soviet-style socialism. And if the state sees development as being tied to the reduction of its rural population, then we should expect a lengthy period of pauperization and more internal immigration to urban areas. Still, I'm not positive I see the full reasoning of the state here: why force shepherds to break up and reduce the pastoralist sector where population density and the demographic factor are not as urgent as they are in the Ferghana valley, where some districts have more than 400 people/km²?

Nevertheless, there is still enormous reluctance to question or criticize styles of leadership and state political leaders. The first answer from those pressed is almost inevitably: "Everything is fine. Now leave us alone and go away." Both societal insiders and outsiders claim this is a typically defensive stance used by people who have faced political repression, and that it shows how cowed people are. I agree with the former statement, but not the latter. Due to historical and cultural exigencies, people display or express their grievances and anger in ways both more subtle and explosive than in systems where the outlets for public complaint are more prominent and acceptable.¹⁴ Recent violence betrays any support for arguments about national timorousness.¹⁵

Unique issues of land, property, and society

With all of the decrees, laws and activities centered around market reforms since the early 1990s, it would seem likely that a prominent concern among a rural population would land reform. While there has been some privatization of land itself throughout Uzbekistan, little of it has taken place where good land is at stake. Although I visited ten kolkhozes and *shirkats* in the Nurota region, I found only one landowner, and the land he bought was unconnected to hereditary bonds. He was himself a kolkhoz official and told me point blank that the only land to be had in the district was the kind that no one would

really want, soil unproductive and not close to water sources. Why buy it at all? He continued that it was for starting a “business,” though he had still not settled on the particular kind of business.

Land ownership itself does not seem to be a foremost concern to shepherds. Unlike Eastern Europe, where people who were expropriated after World War II are clamoring to have land ownership rights restored, Central Asians in Uzbekistan often do not have a family history of land holdings and usually have a very sketchy understanding of the property relations that obtained 75 years ago and more. Townspeople occasionally know more than those on the steppe, because of the existence of documents.

Rights to own land in Central Asia also do not correspond to the Eastern European situation, because the state, especially in Uzbekistan’s case, has shown a very guarded interest in releasing control over its agricultural sector, and has never officially tied land ownership to ethno-nationalism as we have seen in countries such as Latvia and Yugoslavia. Finally, Uzbekistan is entirely different than Eastern Europe with regard to the role of land in securing the economic subsistence of the population. Since most of the country is rural, almost everyone farms something and nobody in the cities will starve, since they have such strong connections to rural relatives. Inflation certainly exists in Uzbekistan but has never been as rampant as it is in parts of Eastern Europe (Verdery 1998:297-302).

There are records about the old relations and forms of territorial organization, but who is willing to seek restitution now? To most people, it would seem a near-futile endeavor, probably about as unlikely to be considered seriously by the authorities as political rehabilitation itself (Borneman 1997:157-158). Actually, in most cases the restitution of property would in fact be tied to political rehabilitation because the confiscation of property and went together with the branding as “kulaks” of local pastoralists who owned anything of significance. Today it is not necessarily a matter of the state leadership opposing such restitution, but more the problem of not having adequate resources to deal with the issue.

Since not everybody in rural Navoi has the time or inclination to become archival researchers, it is unlikely that many people will ever have a real grasp of their families’ losses during the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹⁶ As one resident of Gozgon (a town) said: “The Russians are so smart that they made us forget our past.” But how is it that people claim generally not to know, even the elderly who were

children and adolescents in the late 1920s and 1930s? A span of three generations is admittedly a long time in terms of human memory, especially in societies where ideological texts long ago replaced oral traditions.¹⁷

There is yet another, perhaps *sui generis* aspect to the land and private property issue, which sets the Central Asian rural world apart from much of the postsocialist order. We must talk about land in the context of the by-now indigenous forms of kolkhoz arrangements – precipitating over the course of 60-odd years – and the importance of kin and family ties, which may render the necessity for outright ownership at the present slightly moot.

The kolkhoz society is not just a byproduct of the Soviet system.¹⁸ According to Olivier Roy, who has conducted extensive fieldwork in rural Tajikistan, the kolkhoz's social reality “bypasses everywhere the economic and legal systems” and, historically speaking, constitutes a “revenge of traditional culture and society on an imported system” (1998:5). Privatization, Roy says, entails “*first the destruction of an existing society* and not only of an obsolete economic system” (3). In this context, anthropologists must examine the localities of postsocialist countries very carefully, for here we often find societies within societies, which have pronounced implications for the success of privatization schemes, regardless of what foreign or international aid agencies seek.

In Uzbekistan, villages have a long history as identity groups, whether as clans or as endogamous, patrilineal *mahallas* (communities). And if property should be privatized or new forms of agricultural enterprises created, we need to be able to figure out if a new set of power relationships will emerge and how these will affect the latest dispensation of wealth. Obviously, however, we also cannot disassociate these indigenous structures from macroeconomic processes combined with governing approaches that leave various sectors of the national economy reeling. This is the current situation with regard to the Qoraqol industry.

In vodka veritas

I would like to begin my conclusion by way of an anecdote that took place toward the end of fieldwork, after my colleague and I finished an interview with one of the more than 70 shepherds we queried. I employ it to show how aware people are of what has been lost from the beginning of the transitionalist period.

A shepherd turned to me after we complete our questionnaire:

-I had a dream and in it a foreign guest was going to visit me. Today must be that day.

He bounded up from the floor where we're sitting, walks outside and returns with a bottle whose shape certainly suggests another era.

-I've kept this bottle of vodka around since 1980 when we had a wedding. I was never sure why I kept saving it for so long. But today I know, and we have good reason to drink it. This vodka's 18 years old, it's Soviet vodka!

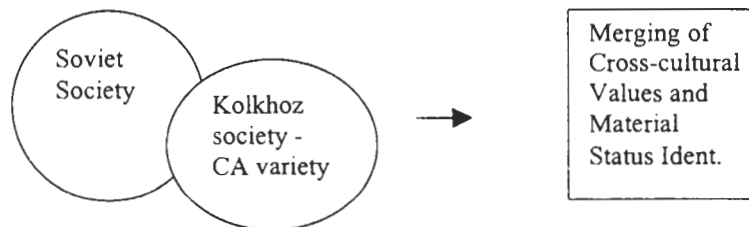
With this, the other four men sitting by us eagerly grinned and laughed. They began to talk among themselves and to me about how this bottle is bound to be terrific, not because of its vintage – which wouldn't mean anything anyway – but because its quality must be guaranteed. After all, it was Soviet and was produced at the Samarqand spirits factory. We toasted not to the memory of the USSR, but to the more routine and welcoming arrival of guests. Even after several rounds from the old bottle, nobody fell into maudlin displays of nostalgia, but talked of the guaranteed quality of the vodka, before a couple were spirited away into “vinous” sleep. Such appeals to alcohol quality served as a conduit for mentioning all of the other higher quality attributes of life that incorporated Soviet society. And now gone were the salaries, the affordable refrigerators, trips to sanatoria, durable boots, and on and on.

The shepherd's son, who had been asked to play music earlier, since we spotted instrument cases in the guest room, finally juiced up his tinny keyboard and began playing some Uzbek pop tunes. He looked haggard and weather-beaten, much like his father, but seemed willing to play. In addition to

minding sheep with his father, this young man occasionally succeeded in earning extra income by performing music at local weddings.

This was the first time I had ever participated in what I term the “domestic tavern culture” (drinking not at a public place but in someone’s home) with a physical object and substance not simply used to recall a better past but one that actually *came from* the past. I found myself thinking that this particular bottle of liquor was more than the typified banal, elixir, for it was part treasure and part ritual object of a near-magical significance. It etherealized the former sense of belonging to another society; it evoked in the men’s minds what had once been, what would soon be irretrievably lost, and what it meant to experience the decline of sinful indulgences.

What *was* Soviet society radically affected the unique Central Asian kolkhoz society, even as we admit that they might best be symbolized as partially overlapping circles or spheres.



Newly transformed or transforming kolkhozes have indeed shed some of the more coercive attributes of centrally planned fulfillment strategies. But they have also shed many of the safety nets that had existed for about three generations and functioned as a popular leveling mechanism in a Central Asian rural economy that had long practiced a kind of communal ethos while also being subject to highly marked social stratification.¹⁹ At the risk of straining the boundaries of credulity, that bottle of vodka may be seen to stand for what was both right and better about the old dual society.

This might strike readers as ironic because of the remarks citizens of socialist countries often made to foreigners from the West about most consumer goods. A decade or so ago, people in Germany

or Russia might remark upon how the “system” or the “Communists” had taken away the potency and gustatory pleasure of items such as beer and mustard. My anecdote reveals that longing for Soviet products is no longer a joke, and that people are tying their memory to concrete aspects of a system that, by today’s standards, seem superior in many ways. As a contrast, talk of new vodka in the present is often bound up with tropes of danger, untrustworthiness, and phoniness. I hope I will not sound too outlandish in suggesting that vodka, a thing so basic to the existence of most adult Central Asian men (though, admittedly, they try hard to hide their fondness for it, owing only in part to their religious heritage) is a thing that appears as unstable and unreliable as most sectors of the very socio-economic state in which they live.

I make mention of this vodka anecdote not because I am trying to prove the virtues of socialism, nor am I trying to say: “See, the common people really liked Communism.” And at the same time, I do not wish to denigrate any sort of market system or the attempt to create a more capitalistic economy. Rather, I point to the complexity of Central Asian socio-economic life because I don’t believe the imposition of Soviet-style socialism could have occurred without cultural negotiations based on factors I’ve mentioned, such as kinship organization and ownership, regardless of Central Asia’s long history of economic life based on international trade and petty entrepreneurialism. At the very least, the Russian-inspired imposition became a two-way street. Rather than people liberating themselves from socialism, or breaking the shackles of it, it would be more relevant to say there is a lot of unknitting to do because of a very intertwined ball of values and organizational strategies. In the end, therefore, the history of Soviet socialism in Central Asia, despite the cruelties and suffering, is one with merits.

It is practically senseless to think that this privatization process marks the simple removal of intrusive government systems. Here I agree with Humphrey and Sneath (1996:7). We do not necessarily have to ask whether or not a privatization process is being put in place, but what form(s) is it taking? Furthermore, whether or not there is a history – beyond anyone’s living memory – of an institutional form we would call the household enterprise as an economic unit, we have to find out how those who succeed manage to accumulate or acquire their capital for the kind of technology necessary to sell goods in

international markets. I have suspicions about the tiny degree to which this exists in Uzbekistan, but I need to accumulate instances and references.

Regarding the Qoraqol industry, I see the *shirkat* transformation as a failure for most shepherds so far. Because the erstwhile transportation system is a shambles, talk of a profusion of “natural” peasants’ markets is ludicrous. How can anyone move their stock on a large scale efficiently, let alone finance these movements? Beyond the ecological problems, which are not nearly as devastating or insurmountable in Uzbekistan as they are in many other parts of the world, there is a question germane to the shepherds: will there be a committed effort on the part of the state/industry leaders to market the products and goods, to try to aggressively popularize products that have long been a tremendous source of pride for the nation, and educate the producers on how to improve their livelihoods?

For local residents everything hinges on whether or not they can make money from their sheep. In our questionnaire, there is a category on the major problems of the *kolkhoz/shirkat* existence, and nearly always the shepherds admitted that the state was not doing enough. The outlook toward capitalism is hardly uniform, but the important matter is that most shepherds think the state has to help them get a handle on any system different from the one they knew. The position of the state seems to be that it has no funds to subsidize this industry anymore and that shepherds will rise or fall by their own hands. Since nothing has really changed in the old life-is-to-be-commanded way of doing things, it shouldn’t be surprising that shepherds feel the vast communication gap has hardly narrowed.

If the *shirkats*’ situation grows more desperate and the managers become increasingly domineering and merciless toward the shepherd members, taking animals away at will to fund goods and services for the *shirkats*, or because they do not believe animals simply died through no direct fault of the shepherds, then we may expect to see the rise of *latifundia*-type organizations.

For anthropology I think one of the most important issues to continue researching in postsocialist societies is the local and popular constructions of notions such as the free market, capitalism, and private enterprise, especially how people think they should be helped from one system into another. In Soviet Central Asia, where there is no common sense of having temporarily abandoned a developed European

system for Communism, we must continue to focus on the ways in which indigenous institutions and long-established patterns of social organization have interacted with, changed, and been changed by their experiences with socialism. And, lastly, in terms of the state-peasantry/shepherds relationship, we have to monitor the extent to which the power dynamics along with communication are altering from the Soviet system.

Endnotes

¹ Tajiks have long formed a substantial part of the semi-nomadic pastoralist population of central Uzbekistan, including the Bukhara and Samarqand provinces. Their linguistic and customary continuity may well be established from artifacts dating to the heyday of the Sogdian empire (6th-7th centuries AD) (Gafurov 1989: 313-329). As a matter of political contingencies during both the Soviet and now independent Uzbekistani eras, many Tajiks living within Uzbekistan have been officially registered as "Uzbeks." In nearly all of the kolkhoz villages that I visited this past summer, the ethnic configurations of each enterprise were mixed, and several featured *de facto* Tajik majority populations.

² Qoraqol pastoralism has been practiced in Central Asia in various forms for millennia. Prior to advances in Qoraqol pastoralism during the Soviet period, the Central Asian khanates of Bukhara and Khiva were famous for raising these animals. In terms of world ovine breeds, the Qoraqol is particularly hale and hearty, able to withstand extremes in temperature and climate that would easily decimate the herds of most European sheep. Under the Soviet system, the Qoraqol industry became a great point of pride for Central Asians, especially for Soviet geneticists and veterinarians who developed polychromatic Qoraqol coats as well as more disease-resistant varieties. The sheep not only provide a high meat yield, averaging 35-40 kg, but are most especially prized for young lamb pelts, which are famous throughout the world as Persian lamb wool or Astrakhan wool. Qoraqol sheep breeding is also renowned in Afghanistan and Iran as well as in parts of the Caucasus and Moldova.

³ Socialist countries were held to a higher standard with regard to leveling devices or the adherence to egalitarian principles, but with good reason, since they (the bureaucracies and those who accepted ideology as concrete) claimed their way of life had practically eliminated class differences. What we saw develop, if one is prepared to stretch one's imagination – and anthropological principles – were industrialized/industrializing chiefdoms. A small elite distributed the accumulated products of hard toiling masses who endeavored not so much to get rich as to increase personal social status, and then kept the best of all those products for themselves and their close circles. Unlike most chiefdoms, kinship did not ordinarily play the role it has and does in Micronesia, for example, but the argument on behalf of Central Asian socialism may make the chiefdom association that much more relevant, for here we do see wealth and political power often bound up with kinship groups, such as lineages or clans (Roy 1997).

⁴ The shepherds are responsible for all of the animals under their charge, and most own a small number (perhaps 20-30) beyond the 300-400 that are kolkhoz property. Shepherds are paid based on the number of animals they mind as well as for the deliveries of animal products, such as fattened sheep, wool, and pelts. At the beginning of the planning year shepherds enter into contracts with the kolkhoz managers. If animals are sick or die, the shepherds themselves may be liable to pay the kolkhoz for the loss of property. Shepherds want to maximize their income potential and worry that the leadership will not find their excuses for livestock loss credible, and thus do everything to make sure the animals thrive. Under today's kolkhoz and *shirkat* conditions, anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that shepherds are even more at the mercy of local leadership. Of course, there are also plenty of wily shepherds who attempt to deceive the farm leaders.

⁵ I coin the term "transitionalism" to refer to a mode of rule that has all to do with the discourse of postsocialist changes to the free market and the establishment of civil society and democracy. Rather than accepting the notion of transition uncritically, I like the term transitionalism because it refers to what the Uzbekistani leadership, in this particular case, would have us believe is a temporary epoch. Rather than saying it is or it is not temporary, historical, and bound to produce certain kinds of change in the economy and politics, the concept of transitionalism allows me to refer to the ways in which the new state leadership tries to promote its own agenda and package it as a progressive phase in its country's history.

⁶ Most of the summer of 1998 was dedicated to surveying Nurota district shepherds and members of their extended patrilocal households about the socio-economic conditions of their lives since republican independence was ushered in. As part of a USAID-funded project run out of the University of Wisconsin, we were mainly trying to assess the key issues for improving livestock agriculture in this impoverished, drought-stricken area; and we also wanted to learn what the post-Soviet system of managed pastoralism is all about from a structural perspective.

⁷ Legalization of livestock ownership is not as cut and dry an issue as one might think. Herders do not simply buy animals from collective farms or co-operatives and receive paid receipts. The agreements are only legal to the extent that the collective or cooperative management recognizes that Herder A “owns” 40 head. Great disputes often arise when sheep that are the property of the collective are lost by a shepherd. Parties argue over guilt, and often the management simply expropriates animals that supposedly belong to a herder or shepherd. The weakest naturally have little recourse in these mildly uncertain circumstances.

⁸ Such fodder and grain crops as sorghum, sesame, millet, chick peas, barley and wheat enjoy a lengthy past in this particular region.

⁹ If the West’s capitalist practices could not determine the success of the Soviet economy, why should its citizens need to know what capitalist countries were paying for their goods? Prices must be fair and equitable, for Soviet leaders would have tolerated nothing less. A similar ignorance is still betrayed whenever ex-Soviet citizens talk about the past strength of their currency relative to the dollar. They are surprised to learn that the powerful rouble meant nothing beyond Soviet or COMECON borders. Occasionally, the “imperialists” could strike blows to Soviet growth, especially because of the arms race, which “forced” the peace-loving Soviet “people” to spend ever more on weapons to protect themselves. Again, Creed and Wedel mention how the difficulties of socialist countries could be blamed on the IMF or Wall Street (1997:255).

¹⁰ I deal with this in far greater detail in my Ph.D. thesis, “The Repeasantization of an Uzbek Kolkhoz”(1998).

¹¹ The new form is simply a contraction of the late nineteenth-century term, which is based on the concept of a “buddy,” “mate,” or “friend,” in the modern Uzbek context. The formation of these early *sharikats* was more than likely a partial response to the burgeoning cotton economy in the Ferghana valley, as larger and larger plantations developed and small-scale enterprises were squeezed. The creation of many were also based on the notion of egalitarianism or true equality in the sharing of goods and inventories; in Uzbek this is known as *teng-sharik*.

¹² Adams discusses the line between state-managed agriculture and state-controlled for Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s (1986:30-49). I think his distinction of control harming the agricultural sector has some relevance to contemporary Uzbekistan, though I am not fully convinced that the new phase should be controlled pastoralism simply because the state abnegates former responsibilities and the shepherds seem to be more at the mercy of local leaders than ever before.

¹³ In her 1996 book, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next*, Verdery provides a very clear example of how socialist industrial enterprises engaged in barter and bargaining. Far from positively endorsing this kind of economic peculiarity or claiming the working masses viewed it favorably, there is nevertheless an explicit admission that this system usually had plenty of resources at its disposal. Consumer demand, simply put, was never a high priority, rather commodity procurement and supply were (21-22). I realize this kind of bartering greatly differs from that which I now outline for a branch of Uzbekistani agriculture today. However, I want to clarify that barter in the context of this people’s lives is not something completely phenomenal or otherworldly.

¹⁴ Frankly, the obvious point here, or the more explicit point I should add, is that post-Soviet Uzbekistan is as politically repressive in many ways as the postwar Soviet period was. So people are simply uncomfortable about suggesting that the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union wasn’t all that bad in comparison to today’s increasing impoverishment and the pulsating moments of isolation and openness (to a larger world economy), with grossly unequal access to the peculiar forms marketization is taking in this country. Based on her work in Kamchatka, Rethmann remarks about a process of critical expression that I think has apposite similarities to the Nurota case:

..., citizens of the small villages in northern Kamchatka and the more urban centers of Russia alike are often too suspicious and too careful to talk with ease about a personal past marked by open and sincere affirmation of party rule. They know only too well that nowadays they may be publicly pointed out, ostracized and faulted for the predicaments and social contradictions in post-Soviet life (1997:771).

¹⁵ I am talking about the recent car bombs set off in Tashkent in February, 1999. Whether or not one of the six bombings was an attempt to assassinate the president, the bombers sent a clear message that they hate the status quo and have the ability to show how unstable they can make the country. Stability is about the only ideological linchpin propounded by the Uzbekistani leadership these days.

¹⁶ Ironically, plenty of elderly residents show up at the regional archives nearly every working day. The reason for this is that at the regional level the archives also function as a kind of hall of records and licensing bureau. People come here to receive documentation to help them receive their pensions. Since inflation often affects pension amounts, the elderly often must return to the archive centers for verification of the changes and to be registered. Their concerns are practical.

¹⁷ *A propos* of Central Asia, it could be very stimulating to compare Kazakhs' and Kyrgyz's knowledge of their pre-Soviet pastoralist heritage because of the relatively recent development of literacy among these peoples (post-1850). Furthermore, a notion of tribal genealogies and descent is still important today as far back as seven generations – transmitted orally to elderly Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

¹⁸ I am unopposed to referring to kolkhozes as an element of civil society, but I would stop short of applying a kind of strict political science interpretation to the effect that all of its elements and arrangements “exist outside of the state's reach or instigation” (Rieff 199:11). The state's ability to intervene and affect the fortunes of kolkhozes remains very direct and powerful.

¹⁹ In rural Central Asian society, generations are separated by little more than 20 years, unlike our own society where it is reckoned to be between 25-30 years. Obviously, with collectivized agriculture near completion in Central Asia by the mid to late 1930s, it stands to reason that fully three generations grew up under not just socialist rule but in the hybridized society of the Soviet Central Asian collective farm village.

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