

Half of the country are my relatives: kinship solidarity, morality and good life in post-socialist Kazakhstan

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Abstract. This paper provides a different interpretation of Kazakh kinship and argues that the impact of clans upon mainstream politics in Kazakhstan is overestimated. After the collapse of the Soviet state, kinship functioned as a ‘shock absorber’ in several post-socialist countries. The importance of kinship solidarity and Islamic norms rose due to Nazarbayev’s politics of promoting Kazakhness. Kazakh perception of traditions includes following a complex set of norms behaving in a way that is in accordance with be according to Islamic values, and mutual support. Kazakh families are large strong networks that cover the country, and the main driving force behind the networks is the practice of reciprocity and an obligation to help one’s relatives. These social norms are confirmed and recreated in civic and family rituals like Nauruz, weddings and other social gatherings. This paper discusses the ideology and practices of kinship networks to demonstrate how Kazakh moral values are embedded within the functioning of private and state structures.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, kinship, social anthropology, post-Socialism, corruption

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Полстраны – мои родственники:
родство, солидарность,
нравственность и хорошая жизнь
в постсоциалистическом Казахстане

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Аннотация. В статье приводится новая интерпретация родства у казахов, а также утверждается, что влияние клановой системы в Казахстане на мейнстримную политику преувеличено. После распада Советского Союза в ряде постсоциалистических стран родство функционировало в качестве «амортизатора». Важность солидарности по принципу родства и исламских норм возросла в результате политики Назарбаева по продвижению казахской идентичности. Казахское понимание традиций включает в себя следование сложной системе норм; поведение, соответствующее тому, что понимается под нормами ислама; и взаимопомощь. Казахские семьи представляют собой обширные, надежные сети, основной движущей силой которых выступает практика реципрокности и обязанность помогать родичам. Эти социальные нормы подтверждаются и воспроизводятся в гражданских и семейных обрядах, таких как Навруз, свадьбы и иные общественные мероприятия. В настоящей статье рассматривается идеология и практики сетей родства и показывается, как казахские моральные ценности встраиваются в функционирование частных и государственных структур.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан, родство, социальная антропология, постсоциализм, коррупция

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*I cannot imagine that we have democracy in Kazakhstan. I cannot
imagine that everybody can do whatever he wants.*

*[Даже не представляю, чтобы в Казахстане у нас была
демократия. Не представляю, чтобы все делали, что хотели.]*

The aim of this paper is to explore the question of how the control over individual is exercised and the role that solidarity through kinship and loyalty plays in Kazakh society. I look at Kazakhstan in the frame-

work of the anthropology of postsocialism, applying models of social anthropology to offer an alternative to the political studies writing that dominates discussion about the development of the region. After giving an overview of the literature of the anthropology of postsocialism and the nature of social networks, I discuss the nature of Kazakh kin relations. The hypothesis how kinship networks are embedded into the state structures and what are the implications of the kin politics within these structures is presented in the second half of the paper.

Kazakhstan is one of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics and the last Soviet republic to declare independence in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since then, Kazakhstan has been governed by President Nursultan Nazarbaev with the support of his Nur Otan Party creating what is often called an ‘authoritarian democracy’. Apart from being rich in mineral resources, Kazakhstan follows the ideology of Eurasianism, claiming to be the meeting point of Asian and European cultures [Marat 2009, pp. 1125–1126], not an incorrect assumption when taking into consideration the republic’s ethnic diversity. The multiethnic foundation of Kazakhstan was laid in the Tsarist period through resettling Russians to the steppe, but was intensified in the Stalinist era due to it being one of the favourite regions for deportation of several ethnic groups and then later in the industrialisation and Virgin Lands campaigns when a huge number of workers migrated to Kazakhstan. There is certain pride in Kazakhstan that their nation contains over a hundred ethnic groups and more than eighty spoken languages. Nevertheless, Kazakh is the state language (sharing its position with Russian as a ‘language for cross-national communication’) with Kazakhs as the biggest ethnic group (63,1%) among the 16 million population. Represented are most ethnic groups from the former Soviet as well as several others, Asian and European cultures and various religions¹. Although the Republic of Kazakhstan is without doubt a Kazakh state (Kazakh holiday calendar is important nationwide, memories of Kazakh national heroes dominate public space) Nazarbayev is concerned with maintain the balance and political representation between major ethnic groups [Adams and Rustemova 2009, pp. 1257, 1260; Matveeva 2009, p. 1105]. Therefore it is wrong to say that only Kazakhs run the economy, politics or a culture of the nation but their dominant role (especially in government structures) is, nevertheless, obvious (cf. [Fierman 2009, p. 1218]). It is no secret that this relative ethnic harmony is due to Kazakhstan’s rich mineral resources of oil, gas and various metals and that makes Kazakhstan the country with the

¹ Perepis (2012), *Dannye perepisi naseleniia Kazakhstana 2009 goda – v besplatnom dostupe*, available at: <http://www.brif.kz/blog/?p=1501> (Accessed 08 August 2012).

highest living standard in Central Asia [Adams and Rustemova 2009, p. 1256; Matveeva 2009, p. 1109].

My own data is based on my visits to the country from 2012–2018 where I conducted fieldwork in Almaty, Astana, and different regions in South Kazakhstan.

Post-socialism and network in anthropology

1991 Steven Sampson asked in *Anthropology Today* ‘Is there an Anthropology of Socialism?’ In his article, Sampson pointed out the many different sides and layers of socialist society, as well as the possible impact of ‘national’ differences on the further development of ex-socialist states [Sampson 1991, pp. 17–18]. He also outlined some issues, such as the importance of kinship and other networks [Sampson 1991, p. 18], which indeed became important for further research, and are also relevant to the present paper.

The term ‘post-socialism’ has caused confusion since the collapse of the Socialist block. Scholars are divided on questions of interpreting historical and future trajectories of these countries. Pickles and Smith [Pickles and Smith 1998] have shown that most of the former socialist countries gave up the idea of the ‘third way’ and switched to ‘shock therapy’. The book *Romanian Agriculture and Transition toward the EU* [Davidova and Thomson 2003], written by a number of economists and political scientists, concluded with a rather pessimistic assessment of economic shortages arising from the lack of transparency and gaps in the law. On the other hand, anthropologists have demonstrated that transparency and clearly-defined borders are difficult to achieve in the transformation process of former socialist countries and are in many cases unwanted by the actors themselves (see [Bridger and Pine 1998; Creed 1998; Cartwright 2001; Kaneff 2002; Torsello 2003]). Lack of transparency does not necessarily hinder the (quasi-) capitalist activities of entrepreneurs, farmers or politicians. They use methods and networks which evade the hard and fast rules and are difficult to describe, giving rise to unexpected changes in the course of their development. Stark [1992, 1996] (cf. [North 1990]) uses a ‘path dependency’ approach, while others are less easily categorised in their particular analyses of the different contemporary political and economic settings which shape the regional variations of privatisation and changes in property relations from Bulgaria and East Germany to Mongolia and Vietnam (e.g. [Alanen et al. 2001; Davidova and Thomson 2003; Abrami 2002; Eidson 2003; Eidson and Milligan 2003; Hedlund 2001; Pickles and Smith 1998; Cartwright 2001; Morrison and Schwartz 2003]).

Another process typical of post-socialist transformations is the recreation of social relations within the community itself. Verdery [1996, 1998, 1999] links new property relations in Transylvanian communities with 'old' power relations. She shows how the former collective farm management makes use of its position in order to keep land-use rights 'fuzzy' and 'elastic' and therefore profit from the situation [1999]. There is an assumption that the Soviet-era 'patronage model' [Beissinger 1992, p. 143] has been exported into a new setting with all its patron-client networks, obligations and rights. My own research in the Russian Far East shows that client-patron networks can have a longer history, i.e. pre-Socialist structures were adapted into the Soviet economy and survived the collapse of the Soviet Union (see [Ventsel 2005]), similar to the Central-Asian clan networks [Collins 2004, Collins 2002; Roy 2000].

Networking is one prominent topic of post-socialist studies. Networks of urban and rural kin, and ties between the state and producers, are the means by which resources are distributed among people and at least a minimal living standard guaranteed for all the parties involved (e.g. [Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Czegledy 2002; Kaneff 2002]). My interest in post-socialist transformation lies not only in the groups and collectives but also in the 'smallest unit of society' in socialist ideology, the family. Although family was not fully controlled by the socialist state and retained a certain independence and function of mutual support, especially when state institutions were unable to provide certain services (for example, childcare for pre-school age children, canteen catering, etc.) [Dunn and Dunn 1988, p. 76; Buchowski 2001, p. 124], the family was nevertheless embedded in the social, political and economic structures of the state. When the state fell away, these networks were activated in all of the former Socialist societies.

However, the tradition of studying social networks is far older than post-socialist studies. Radcliffe-Brown defined networks as the set of social relations within concrete reality [Radcliffe-Brown 1968, p. 190]. In anthropological literature, network analysis has linked the topic with reciprocity and made much use of 'the reciprocity networks' [Lomnitz 1977, p. 209]. The role of informal networks is as a 'shock absorber', monitoring resource use and access to goods and various services [Scott 1976, p. 27]. In discussing reciprocity and networks, there are many works that stress the importance of kinship as the backbone of networks in the post-socialist environment (e.g. [Humphrey 1998; Brandtstädter 2001; Kaneff 2002]). Kinship was treated in Soviet ethnography as a 'cultural form', which changed with 'progress' [Dragadze 1984], and some scholars still see kin structures as a part of 'traditional culture' (Shcheikin, I.I., Lapparova, I.F., Savvinov, A.I., Petrova, V.A., Lukina, M.P. and Petrova, N.D. in [Tezisy 2002]).

In fact, the extended family network functions in the 'new era' largely as a socio-economic cooperation in survival. Kinship is able to react flexibly to new situations and change its nature and strategies [Kanef 1998], and in a post-socialist society becomes an 'important orienteering technique' for cooperation [Anderson 1998, p. 59]. According to [Laughlin 1974], when analysing networks in the context of reciprocity flexibility is an important quality of those networks. Laughlin argues that the nature of cooperation within the network is determined by the lower limit of 'production output', which I interpret as dispersed 'resources', which caused networks to expand socially and geographically. Every network has a hierarchy and a system of obligations and rights which people hold with respect to one another according to their position (i.e. access to resources) (cf. [Gluckman 1965]). The obligation and expectation of mutual support united people in the Kazakh kin structure similar to the case of the Latin American *compadrazgo*, a relationship linking godparents with godchildren [Romanucci-Rossi 1973]. Common to both is that networking is explained through tradition.

Kin networks, identity, tradition and Islam

One evening while in Almaty in 2012, I received a call from my PhD-student. "Turn on the TV, there is a funny comedy show about Kazakh culture!" she said. After turning on the TV and surfing the channels I found the show, a kind of Kazakh stand up comedy contest with slightly theatrical features. At that moment two young actors were on the stage boasting about who has more relatives. When one said that his whole hometown were his kin people, the other responded "But half the country are my relatives!" Huge applause followed.

"Kazakh kin relations are strong," said an American working in Astana and this is the fact that every visitor who interacts with Kazakhs notices quickly. According to my experience, two issues that Kazakhs love to speak about are their hospitality (*gostepriimstvo*) and their kinship, especially clan conglomerates called *zhuz*, both related to the issue of this paper. Apart from what people say, strong kinship ties also become very obvious in what they do: from the first day of my fieldwork, taking care of me involved not only my hosts but also their families. My driver was a brother of my host, I stayed at their relatives' homes in villages we visited, I was invited to restaurants and night clubs by my colleagues' families and so forth. The closeness and mutual support of relatives also occurred in random discussions: a woman demonstrated her new car that she bought because her brother opened a car trading centre, someone told me how she found a job because her grandfather

'knew someone', a PhD student told me that her father sold part of his enterprise to build houses for her and her brother and sister, another student told how all his family supports him financially while he studied for a PhD. Very impressive was a visit to an *akim* (head of a district administration) and his family not far from Almaty. In the centre of a poor village stood a beautiful new villa owned by the biggest farmer of the region. The old man drove me around in a shiny black Range Rover and showed me his domain. This is because he is the father of the *akim* I was explained later, this is very untypical amount of wealth for a Kazakh farmer, his son built him the house and bought the car, another added.

Above I quoted some studies that show how post-socialist transformation causes a 'revival' of 'traditional family relations'. First of all, this is explained due to the economic hardship that pushes women out of the labour market (although there can be opposite examples as well (see [Ashwin and Lytkina 2004]) and 'makes' them into traditional housewives again. In the case of Kazakhstan, social and cultural processes after the collapse of the Soviet Union were much more complex. It is argued that Soviet Central Asia was never fully 'sovietised': moreover, the Kazakh Communist elite was allowed a certain autonomy in governing the republic as long as they remained loyal to Moscow and the republic fulfilled its economic obligations [Olcott 1987, p. 186; Dave 2007, p. 86]. Moreover, many commentators forget the widespread Soviet 'blat' system that also involved kin people. Therefore, in Soviet times kinship politics had an important position in the Central Asian republics as was under the influence of pre-Soviet traditions as well as Islam [Dave 2007, p. 25; Roy 2000; Hiro 1994, pp. 109–110].

After the declaration of independence, the Republic of Kazakhstan began with new nation building, creating a new identity for the Kazakh themselves. At the beginning of the 1990s the Republic of Kazakhstan was seen as a state of and for Kazakhs, a status that was slowly reshaped by Nazarbayev into a multi-ethnic state [Cummings 2009; Aitken 2009; Dave 2007]. The ambiguous multi-ethnic identity of Kazakhstan today is described as a product of a 'flexible ethno-nationalist policy' that has avoided direct ethnic conflict but is confusing to the Kazakhs. Many Kazakhs are not sure whether the Kazakhs are 'masters' in a state that bears their name or not. Despite the fact that Kazakhs are a 'leading force' in the Republic of Kazakhstan (i.e. constitute a disproportionate group of state officials [Cummings 2009, p. 100; Aitken 2009], and Kazakh symbols and holidays are officially used to shape the nation's identity², I heard many complains (from my third day in the

² Nauruz, the Muslim New Year is an official holiday and the state's code of arms is *shanyrak*, a wooden top from the Kazakh yurt (cf. [Buchli 2007]).

country onwards) that Kazakh people do not have a say in their country. Mostly, these complaints were addressed against what was seen as the privileged status of the Russian language³.

As a result, Kazakh culture and the language have increasingly becoming important as the essence of Kazakh ethnic identity. I recall the celebration of International Women's Day (or 8th of March) in my institute with long speeches in Kazakh language. A colleague who translated said suddenly: "Five years ago we would have had all these speeches in Russian". The language shift was obvious, especially when after the official part of the celebration and enjoying a more informal atmosphere, half of the people switched to Russian. For most Kazakhs the public presence of their language in the social and cultural life of Kazakhstan is important.

With artefacts that can be combined with a modern life, Kazakh social norms and etiquette gain importance in everyday social life of Kazakhs. Several scholars wrote that Kazakh ethnic identity is strongly connected with Islam and that the independence of Kazakhstan gave a free wave to religion previously oppressed in the Soviet period [Hann and Pelkmans 2009; Hiro 1994]. However, less stressed is the impact of the legalisation of Islam and its continuing consolidation of Kazakh identity: the 1000 new mosques that were built during the first ten years of independence [Dzhalalov 2006, p. 74; Omelicheva 2011] and whose number is constantly increasing are not only sites for religious worship but embody norms and values that might be Islamic for outsiders but for Kazakhs are essentially part of their culture.

The 'culturisation' of Islamic norms also expresses the fact that Kazakhs are not very active practitioners of Muslim rituals such as 'reading *namaz*' or praying five times a day, also attendance in the mosques is not very high [Rose 2002, p. 105]. I noticed that while my students or Kazakh colleagues described themselves as Muslims they also stressed the fact that they do not pray on a regular basis of follow Ramadan strictly. Moreover, I had the impression that being a practicing Muslim was something special, something noteworthy to mention by introduction: 'He (or she) reads *namaz*.' Kazakh follow a Sufi tradition that emphasises individual religiosity and family rituals [Omelicheva 2011, p. 247]. At the same time a Sufic Islam strengthens the authority of the parents and reinforces the kinship loyalty where younger must obey elders without question.

It is difficult to state whether the norms that regulate Kazakh social relations, a certain concept of 'good behaviour', are originally pre-Islamic or adopted with Islam. From an anthropological point of

³ "Why we do have to learn Russian but Russians do not have to learn Kazakh", was a sentence I heard constantly.

view, this is not very important: people believe that kinship solidarity and loyalty, also hospitality (*gostepriimstvo*) are part of Kazakh tradition. The interplay between tradition and Islam shows that the authority of Kazakh traditional norms is cemented by the increasing importance of Islam which also supports alike ideas such as donating money for good causes, obedience and respect to elders, modest manners and a patriarchal tradition. Moreover, with the rise of Islam, the ancestors' cult, part of Kazakh tradition, was legalised as the cultural heritage. Omelicheva concludes that the post-independence ancestor cult with new shrines and communal rituals defines and shapes communal and Muslim identity in Kazakh communities. "In this way, values, traditions, social mores and ethics of the community became 'Muslim' in their own right" [Omelicheva 2011, p. 247].

Shortly after the declaration of independence, Nazarbayev was 'highly supportive' of Islam with the hope of creating around it a new post-Soviet identity [Achilov 2012, p. 87]. He was probably aware that even in the Soviet era some Kazakh intellectuals attempted to make Islam more public arguing that Islam was part of the Kazakh identity and cultural heritage, not only a religion [Hiro 1994, p. 110]. This policy also legalised the solidarity and loyalty of kinship as a positive feature of Kazakh culture. Schatz [Schatz 2004] goes even further arguing that the state wanted to revive the clans as a tradition, to establish what he calls a 'salience of clans'. Bhavna Dave is of the opinion that Nazarbayev gave up this policy quickly in order to secure the loyalty of the Russified Kazakhs and Russians in the North [Dave 2007, p. 122]. Another issue is radicalisation of Islam that has caused conflict between different Islamic schools and is an issue of discussion among Kazakhs now in 2012⁴. This has caused a certain 'de-Islamisation' in the national discourse and probably created a feeling of de-Kazakhisation of the state among many people.

Kinship and reciprocity

David Sneath describes post-privatisation kinship networks in Mongolia as a structure where all members have their function and position. Every position is linked with a set of obligations and to a right to expect help from other kin people [Sneath 1993]. There is no reason not to view Kazakh kin networks in the light of their tradi-

⁴ However, one friend suggested that the danger of radical Islam is not as big as it seems. He is of the opinion that the image of danger and emotion around this question is artificially created by the state in order to keep certain groups out of politics.

tions as similarly structured institutions with a wide range of practices embedding obligations and rights into social practices. Adreinne Lynn Edgar analyses the tribal traditions of people in Turkestan, a region that was later divided into five Soviet Central Asian republics and concludes that tribes in a stateless society had a function for shaping behaviour and establishing allegiances [Edgar 2004, p. 7]. This 'rules of the game' features in Kazakh society – as anywhere with a (former) nomadic tradition – the strong emphasis in mutual reciprocity [Roberts 2012, p. 312]. Kirsten Hastrup sees networks as a 'social whole' where everybody has to contribute [Hastrup 2007, p. 48]. The obligation to share and contribute is stressed also by other scholars of kinship [Galvin 2001; Brandtstädter 2001; Easter 1996; Godelier 1975]. One must follow these obligations to gain 'honour and reputation' that 'lie in the recognition of others' [Bryceson 2007, p. 4]. This why *gostepriimstvo* (hospitality) is in Kazakh culture a code of behaviour, obligation and investment in social relations. As several people told me: "When people give you something, share their belongings with you, then they actually expect something back later." Kirsten Hastrup describes society as the Theatre of Action where cultural texts are 'acted out' [Hastrup 2007, p. 50]. Kazakh *gostepriimstvo* is acted out on an individual level by hosting friends or relatives but also at huge social events like weddings and funerals. One of my PhD students told me about her brother's wedding to which 700 guests were invited. The whole family contributed to the event, her brother even had to sell his car to pay some costs. She told me that her parents made very expensive presents to the parents of the bride and their relatives. Weddings are typical events for establishing social alliances and investing into social relations. The parents 'acted out' their cultural texts in order to gain recognition from others and cement new alliances. No different are Kazakh funerals, which are huge and expensive gatherings. As research shows, even in a highly defined kinship structure, kinship relations in practice are fluid and must be constantly reshaped and confirmed see [Gersohn 2001].

Kazakhs love to speak about their tradition of *gostepriimstvo*, a complex set of norms including reciprocity, obligations and hospitality. A strategy of survival in post-Socialist times, *gostepriimstvo* has a legitimate foundation in the cultural revival and cultural policy of the state. Victor Buchli compares the quality of the buildings in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, with the fragile official social relations that people cannot trust and must therefore rely on kinship networks [Buchli 2007]. Kazakh kinship is often discussed as a structure for corruption, where kin people support their own relatives [Alexander 2007; Roberts 2012]. This is not the only way corruption plays its role in consolidating kinship relations. High and constant bribing,

making presents and showing *gostepriimstvo* can be expensive and often forces the whole family to pool together their resources. The kinship answer to corruption is a similar reciprocal sharing of resources as any other formal or informal economic activity.

Conclusion: political implications of Kazakh kinship

Another issue Kazakhs like to discuss with their visitors is *zhuz*. *Zhuz* is a conglomerate of clans and in the Kazakh tradition exist three *zhuzes*: Older, Middle and Younger (sometimes also translated as the Great, Middle and Small Horde) (e.g. [Olcott 2002, p. 183]). These clan conglomerates are important identity marker for Kazakhs and to my knowledge most Kazakhs know their *zhuz* origin. *Zhuzes* are divided between *taips*, that are sometimes described as ‘tribes’ [Olcott 2002, p. 183]. They are the source of much enthusiasm from Western scholars, especially political scientists, when they talk about clan politics and corruption in Kazakhstan. Martha Brill Olcott has counted that 35% of Kazakhs belong to the Older Zhuz, 40% to the Middle Zhuz and 25% are identified with the Smaller Zhuz [Olcott 2002, p. 183]. As I was told, people from Middle Zhuz live overwhelmingly in the North, whereas South and West Kazakhstan are traditionally regions for other *zhuzes*. Several Western scholars tend to interpret Nazarbayevs politics as an attempt to find balance between and control *zhuzes*. Nazarbayev himself belongs to the Older Zhuz, his wife comes from “politically prominent” Middle Zhuz family and Nazarbeyv’s ministers are prominent representatives from all *zhuzes* [Olcott 2002, pp. 185–186; c.f. Aitken 2009, p. 163; Cummings 2009, p. 99]. The importance of one’s clan identity, crucial for the life path, is also stressed by Kazakhs. In 1995, 39% of Kazakhs believed that *zhuz* origin is important for one’s career and Catherine Alexander associates corruption in the Almaty administration directly with *zhuz* [Alexander 2007, p. 95–96]. Several Western scholars emphasise that there are more loyalty networks beyond *zhuzs* such as the Soviet era patron-client relations that include non-Kazakhs or *zhuzless* Kazakhs [Cummings 2009, p. 99; Olcott 2002, pp. 185–187] but this does not reduce their belief in *zhuz* as an actor in the Grand Politics.

I share my scepticism with Roberts, who argues that even if Nazarbayev has adopted the image of a Kazakh khan who has united *zhuzes*, then in reality *zhuz* has more cultural than political or economic value [Roberts 2012, pp. 317–318]. When I told to my colleague in Almaty that Western scholars tend to see Kazakhstan’s politics as a balance between *zhuzes*, then his comment was “We are

no aborigines. Today *zhuz* is important because Kazakhs construct their identity. In reality, there are other markers for loyalty and cooperation than *zhuz*.” (personal communication, March 10, 2012). Namely families, school friendships, common jobs and ethnic loyalties. It seems that Western political scientists do not understand the dimension of a *zhuz*: it is difficult to believe that millions of Kazakhs act as a unit and obey their leaders because they belong to the same *zhuz*. My Almaty colleague confirmed my doubts saying: “In the night you can be beaten and mugged by your *zhuz* relative, the origin does not protect you.” Edward Schatz’s research shows that clan affiliation helped people to obtain employment and have access to resources other than the fictive *zhuz* membership [Schatz 2004]. The corruption and nepotism on all levels is rather an expression of family and clan politics than marks the expansion of a particular *zhuz* into a certain sphere. Clan loyalties and clan subordination that could be probably applied by other big ethnic groups in Central Asia seem dubious when it comes to Kazakhs: after all, Kazakhs had the highest rate of Russification and inter-ethnic marriage among the Soviet Central Asian titular ethnic groups. To interpret Nazarbayev’s family politics as *zhuz* politics is an exaggeration: I have tried to find out what makes one a “prominent *zhuz* member” but have not found any concrete answer. It is more logical to interpret Nazarbayev’s family politics as it is: a family and clan affiliation whose purpose is to secure dominance and the resources for a concrete kinship group. Deniz Kandiyoti warns against looking at transformation in Central Asia as too closely related to the specific culture of the region [Kandiyoti 2002]. Post-socialist transformations have different trajectories in different countries and Kazakh way is closely connected to the cultural politics and play with symbols or identities. However, the re-activation of kinship networks, reciprocity, mutual support and sharing is a common strategy in all post-socialist countries. The case of the Kazakhs demonstrates the relevance of the state cultural politics in legitimising these strategies that have remained economic by the nature.

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