Dinner with Akhmet

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This article explores post-Soviet gender ideologies in Tajikistan by unpacking a series of encounters, especially my dinner with “Akhmet,” in northern Tajikistan. I traveled to Tajikistan from my home in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where I was conducting ethnological fieldwork. A Tajik family I met through mutual friends in Uzbekistan had invited me to visit, and it seemed like an ideal opportunity to expand my knowledge of the region. The husband of the family, “Enver,” had invited me to stay and offered to introduce me to a number of informants for the project I was completing. The trip would draw me into by far the most dangerous of my ethnographic encounters in the former Soviet Union.

I met Akhmet because Enver asked him to accompany us across the border. Enver’s wife and children had been away on vacation, and Enver decided to bring us all across the border at the same time. The plan was for me to stay for a week, interview a number of consultants, and then return to Uzbekistan. In late 1998, the Uzbek-Tajik border was an extremely tense one. In some locations, there were as many a seven checkpoints with armed guards within one border crossing. Thus getting across the border was no simple task. In fact, the first border checkpoint we approached refused to let us pass. We returned along the road we had come, then approached a different border crossing, stopping along the way at a café where Enver’s wife Jamila and his daughter Alima drank orange sodas and Akhmet changed the plates on his car. My first inkling that Akhmet had unusual connections was that he had managed to obtain both Tajik and Uzbek license plates. On our second try with the Tajik plates at another border crossing, the guards were more receptive. Akhmet’s casual self-introduction, including his position as head of tax inspection, led the guard to back away from the car, bow slightly, and wave us through.

Akhmet dropped us off, exhausted and dehydrated, at Enver and Jamila’s home. As he unloaded our bags and closed the trunk he suggested that he come back the next night so we could go out to dinner.

While I assumed, based on their smiles and nods of approval, that Akhmet was inviting the whole family, I learned as I was getting ready that he (and the family) envisioned the dinner as something more like a "date"—I would be alone with him for the evening. The toasts Akhmet offered that night are mined for what they can reveal about gender and power in post-Soviet Central Asian life. They index a post-Soviet gender ideology profoundly stressed by the transition. Building on the idea that conversational discourse is an important site in which cultural meanings are negotiated and challenged (Austin 1962; Hanks 1996; Ries 1997), I explore toasts as a social and linguistic ritual. They yield insight not only into the encounter between an anthropologist and consultant, but the wider social context in which Soviet gender norms were being critiqued and Tajik gender regimes were being negotiated.

More specifically, the toasts I explore index a gender ideology that reflected the Soviet legacy and a reaffirmation of “traditional” male and female roles. For example, marital infidelity was reframed as a Muslim tradition called “polygyny,” lending it an aura of respectability. The naturalization of difference led to a concept of “women’s happiness” that was developed as a unique category of experience. In other words, the maternal role was affirmed, the domestic was idealized, and women’s “inherent” differences from men were to be developed and accentuated.

Gender organizes social differences that help reinforce other hierarchies. I therefore also consider the ways in which my consultant’s position as a tax inspector involved him in networks of taxation and tribute, privilege and profit that facilitated his construction of himself as male. For example, the family I stayed with described him as a “big” or “important” man, and his possession of multiple weapons had earned him deference from other interlocutors. In a place where the government and criminal networks overlap, Akhmet was able to “sell” not only his ability to inspect, negotiate, and insure compliance, but to charm, entertain, and seduce. What follows builds on Humphrey’s (2002) argument that post-Soviet “Mafias” have come to stand for a way of life. I further suggest that his quasi-legal activities were fundamentally gendered, having as much to do with reinforcing constructions of masculinity as filling a vacuum left by the collapse of state structures. Conveying aspects of everyday life at the top of the Tajik social structure, this brief exploration will add a personal and ethnographic dimension to knowledge of Central Asia gleaned from sociology, political science, and history.

**LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY TAJIKISTAN**

Tajikistan is a landlocked and mountainous country located in the heart of Central Asia, north of Afghanistan, south of the Kyrgyz Republic, and east of Uzbekistan. High mountains and arable land are the country, but Tajikistan also has a predominance of mountains and rivers in the north, with the most snow at certain times of year, has supported distinctive groups. Most of them are Pathans and Muslim. Typically, a distinction is made between the plains in the north, where I visited, and the center, east and southwest, who were traditionally more developed and urban.

Following Tajik independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country was torn by strife. The old power was carried out peacefully in the context of the Tajikistan Constitution, but after a former leader of the Communist Party was challenged by the legitimacy of the presidency with the president’s supporters and opposition. Between 20,000 and 60,000 were killed and most commentators estimate that some 30,000 were killed in 1992. According to a 1992 report by the UN, one-tenth of the population, were internally displaced or sought refuge outside the country, in Afghanistan. Many unarmed civilians were murdered and by the 2000s, the UN was leading a political settlement on the establishment of Peace and Security in the region. There were numerous skirmishes between government and Islamist groups over the issue of Afghan refugees and security. Many modern wars have been fought in the region.

While some of the tensions had been resolved, the conflict in Tajikistan was primarily a civil war. The Uzbek people were mobilized to wrest control of the government and an influence over the ideas and principle of the country. At issue was secular or Islamic, democratic or authoritarian. The Soviet era, when Soviet officials came from one region to the next to take control of the country and intensive agricultural projects. There was greater integration, but also created conflict between greater consciousness of differences. In particular, after the civil war, as the skirmishes were
of Uzbekistan. High mountains and arid plateaus characterize much of the country, but Tajikistan also has some of the most densely populated arable land in the world and a predominantly agrarian population. The physical geography of Tajikistan, with mountain passes that are closed by snow at certain times of year, has supported the development of culturally distinctive groups. Most of them are part of the Iranian cultural world, and Muslim. Typically, a distinction is made between the peoples of the plains in the north, where I visited, and the people of the mountains in the center, east and southwest, who were somewhat more isolated and developed stronger regional and local identities. Tajikistan is by no means exclusively Tajik: there are large Uzbek communities, as well as communities of Arabs, Jews, Kyrgyz, and since the Soviet period, Russians, other Slavic people, Armenians, Germans, and Crimean Tatars.

Following Tajik independence from the Soviet Union in September 1991, the country was torn by strife. The initial struggle for post-Soviet power was carried out peacefully in the context of a democratic election, but after a former leader of the Communist Party was elected president, the legitimacy of the presidency was widely contested. Tension between the president's supporters and opposition groups escalated to civil war. Between 20,000 and 60,000 were killed in the first year of fighting, and most commentators estimate that some 50,000 lives were lost between May and December 1992. According to UNHCR, 600,000 people, or one tenth of the population, were internally displaced, and at least 80,000 sought refuge outside the country, in Afghanistan. In the context of fighting, many unarmed civilians were murdered. A peace process initiated by the UN eventually resulted in a political and military settlement that was based on a power-sharing formula. After the June 1997 General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord, there were numerous skirmishes between government forces and militia groups, as well as attempts and successful assassinations of political opponents, and the kidnapping, ransom, and murder of Westerners that seems to accompany many modern wars.

While some of the tensions had been expressed in ethnic terms, the conflict in Tajikistan was primarily a civil one in which different interest groups mobilized to wrest control of the state and its resources, and gain an influence over the ideas and principles on which the newly independent country would be based. At issue was whether Tajikistan would be secular or Islamic, democratic or authoritarian. The conflict was in part a product of the Soviet era, when Soviet authorities forcibly transferred people from one region to the next to provide labor for new industries and intensive agricultural projects. The inter-regional exchanges led to greater integration, but also created conflict by sparking competition and greater consciousness of differences. I visited Tajikistan in this period after the civil war, as the skirmishes were winding down. I went in spite of
the security risks because I knew that, traveling with locals in a private car, I would not attract a great deal of attention. Having lived in the region for over a year, my clothes and demeanor were by then less American, and my facility in Russian led many to assume I was from one of the Baltic states.

Since the end of the war, the Tajik government has sought to rebuild Tajikistan’s destroyed economy, especially with Russian aid. It has also sought international investment, primarily in mining. But the country is still marked by the wars. One of the poorest of the former Soviet republics, Tajikistan presents social and economic indicators suggesting there was a decline until after the General Agreement was signed. Tajikistan has typically had the lowest rating of the USSR successor states on the UN human development index. Illegal trafficking in the main exports (aluminum, cotton, gold, and narcotics) is believed by many to be the most dynamic sector of the economy. Strengthened criminal networks left over from war and Soviet collapse bring politicians, bureaucrats, border guards, and militia leaders into a web of patron-client-type relationships that permeate the social landscape, creating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust. These relationships are of course not neutral but permeated (and strengthened) by the prevailing gender norms and ideologies. Hence even the mundane, everyday aspects of gender belong not to “human nature,” but to an ever-changing social landscape formed out of cultural meanings and social practices.

EVERYDAY LIFE AFTER CIVIL WAR

The “everyday” has to do with “those most repeated actions, those most traveled journeys, those most inhabited spaces that make up, literally, the day to day” (Highmore 2002: 1). But the everyday also pertains to a quality that infuses the least examined aspects of life, emerging from background practices that are so taken for granted that, most often, they go unnoticed. While we often think of the everyday as that which is most familiar, as Highmore points out (2002), in modernity conditions disrupt our ways of being in the world, and the everyday becomes a process of making the unfamiliar familiar, incorporating the new, and folding traditions back into forms of adaptation and change. The everyday is therefore an ideal site for exploring gender and gender relations, which to my view are at once the core of our most habituated ways of being in the world and the locus of our most intense struggles for change.

In the Tajikistan of 1998, the everyday had been radically circumscribed, and seemed almost flattened by the prospect of violence. Most of the families I visited lived very constrained lives, confined by apprehension to their homes. The monotony of the long, hot days was broken only by the clink of tea cups, the crunch of another melon being opened and sliced, and once in a while the sound of distant gunfire. On my first day at their house, Enver left early to go to work. I stayed an extra month, and again, pausing only to pull her long hair out of her eyes.

Enver came home for lunch and lamented that while women used to do everything from scratch, this is no longer the case. Her friend’s daughter had commented that housework was her work, and that she did not need to be in the kitchen. Enver and Jamila disagreed. They explained their dependency: Enver’s devotion to Jamila, and a metaphysical connection—she drinks it and it “turns into” him, a source of comfort for them in their dependency. When she is at work, she comes to greet him bringing coffee so that he may wash. Then she points him to the kitchen, so that he slides into them easily on his own.

Enver supported the idea that men could be “the women.” This was one point on which central Asian women seemed to be pulled. The most recent form of traditional power balance was the ability to celebrate the traditional power balance, and those who were drawn to working along Russia led to the development of women. So in law was followed by women’s development was for men to impose Islamic regulation of the social usefulness of pol- icies that would otherwise remain single in a marriage (in a discussion of how women arc and can endure), hold back the world more strategically. He argued that to turn him in the right direction and to turn him in the right direction and powerbility, and the one he heard that a husband had to turn him in the right direction and

Everyday life is infused with time, and Jamila’s routine was habitual and closely tied. The lives of other families I visited were not to say that it was unquestioned, but the context and relationship were the subjects of interest. Gender relations became a site where information in the mundane. Prior to the Jamila had worked—he was in constr.
left early to go to work. I stayed and chatted with Jamila, who, having been gone for over a month, moved from washing to cooking and back again, pausing only to pull her long hair back and tell me stories from their lives.

Enver came home for lunch and in richly praising his wife's cooking, lamented that while women used to be known for their ability to make everything from scratch, this is no longer the case. Jamila added that a friend's daughter had commented that she does not consider housework to be her work, and that she did not go to school so that she could stand in the kitchen. Enver and Jamila disagreed with this view, and exchanged a knowing look. They explained their relationship in terms of mutual dependency: Enver's devotion to Jamila emerging from his reliance on her, and a metaphysical connection—she hands him a piala (cup) of water, he drinks it and it "turns into" him, a sort of relational metaphysics linking them in their dependency. When she hears him coming in the door after work, she comes to greet him bringing a bowl of warm water and a towel so that he may wash. Then she points his slippers in the right direction so that he slides into them easily on his way to the couch.

Enver supported the idea that men should be able to have multiple wives. This was one point on which Enver and his wife disagreed. Central Asian women seemed to be pulled in competing ways: some wanted to celebrate the traditional power balance within the family, while other were drawn to working along Russian and Soviet lines that would enable them to develop as women. So in some families, adat or customary law was followed by women of their own volition and in others the tendency was for men to impose Islamic norms. Enver embedded his explanation of the social usefulness of polygyny (which enables women who would otherwise remain single in a male-dominated society to be married) in a discussion of how women are paradoxically the "stronger" sex—they can endure more, hold back their emotions longer, and assess their world more strategically. He argued that a Muslim woman should know how to present herself as a "dummy" to make her husband feel strong at the same time that she leads him from behind. This view resonated with an analogy I often heard that a husband is the "head" and the wife is the "neck." The idea is that while he might possess the brains, he relies on her to turn him in the right direction and he can do nothing without her.

Everyday life is infused with and structured by gender norms. Enver and Jamila's routine was habitual and in many ways familiar, resembling closely the lives of other families I visited across the region. But this is not to say that it was unquestioned, because their roles, responsibilities, and relationship were the subjects of intense reflection. In fact "everyday" gender relations became a site where it was possible to see radical transformation in the mundane. Prior to the Soviet collapse, both Enver and Jamila had worked—he was in construction, she was a teacher in a local
school. During Enver's prison term (for political activity), Jamila had supported their two children until his release. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union however, everything had changed: Jamila's teaching job paid so little that there was little point to keeping it. In order to make a living, Enver had been pushed from construction into the rapidly privatized and criminalized world of mining and business—a transition that brought him directly into contact with Akhmet, who had inspected his business.

As the head of tax inspection, Akhmet had found Enver in violation of certain tax codes and had frozen his assets. They eventually talked, ate, and drank their way through their positioning on opposite "sides" to build a friendship. With the passage of time and an exchange of bottles they had made friends and grown to respect one another. This happened along the lines that Pesman has described, when drinking involves a "theft of time," something that creates a world of "us," where one can open oneself and discuss anything (2000:172). Drinking creates a realm of sociality that holds the "real" world at bay, and creates new "worlds." Frequently, the worlds that are created in drinking involve an impression of you and me against the world (Pesman 2000). One of the things that makes Soviet drinking a ritual is that, unlike in the West, Soviets drink together. This means that the sip of wine or the shot of vodka is taken in unison, after being consecrated by toasts. The liturgy of toasts is well enough established that there are manuals and guidebooks filled with instructions and suggestions.

Following Tajik independence and all the changes that it brought to their everyday lives, Enver and Jamila ascribed to a masculinism in which Enver was the unquestioned head of the household—a role that sanctioned him to bark commands and verbally abuse his loved ones. Whitehead defines masculinism as a point at which the dominant forms of masculinity and heterosexuality meet ideological dynamics, and are thereby legitimized as privileged and unquestionable (Whitehead 2002:97). At a broader level, the masculinism is manifested in myriad ways, from a reliance on violence to solve disputes to the sexual division of labor. The politically and socially dominant role of men, however, stands in a complex relationship to Soviet gender norms. While Soviet laws and practices were initially predicated on female emancipation, ambivalence and lack of implementation meant that women had a "double burden" under the Soviet system. Enver and Jamila used their understanding of Islamic customary law to justify the balance of power and responsibilities they found most comfortable, and took for granted that there are fundamental differences between men and women.

The journey from Uzbekistan into Tajikistan, which had in more peaceful times taken two hours, had taken us close to six hours. Worn out by the road, we retreated to the cramped apartment their two children. As the time to go down in front of the TV and I realized I leave. Enver asked me if I had brought is a very big man, you know." Fortune, with his ored suit folded neatly into the small fitting it on, and realizing this was not I began to feel nervous. Given the kinexperience within his community if anything that it was safe enough to go. I was lethargy and entrapment I felt after a living room with little prospect of interaction.

We climbed into Akhmet's pale about the evening news. They had just of a small town nearby who had been with some of his staff. Having expected approval, I grew even tenser as he seemed to proceed with caution. Akhmet told his which had a small restaurant surrounded a large, calm lake. There were also swimminpool. As we strolled down a walk with the people that we passed greeted a hand on heart, and then backing away hand, and placed it on their foreheads. nitary, Akhmet explained that he called and meat for the bear he kept in a pot sometimes brought the bear here, on receieving fearful looks that he received, or just such deference.

The restaurant itself was a relatively and chairs on a terrace covered by a dance floor. We sat down at a table looked at one of the waiters and decided was immediate. The waiter put down a nic lawn chair in his way, ran to our Na: Tajik wine, "Black Eyes," to celebrateing too much]. You will sleep here tonight with polite refusal, I sank deeper into my chair the world was disturbingly autocratic was particularly unclear.

The first toast, as we raised our glasses was by chance that we met. This toast for relaxing," set the stage, framing our enounter had a potentially deep future: Akhmet.

DINNER WITH AKHMET

The journey from Uzbekistan into Tajikistan, which had in more peaceful times taken two hours, had taken us close to six hours. Worn out by the
road, we retreated to the cramped apartment shared by Enver, Jamila, and their two children. As the time to go to dinner grew close, the family sat down in front of the TV and I realized that they were not preparing to leave. Enver asked me if I had brought any evening clothes, adding, "He is a very big man, you know." Fortunately, I had a black and peach-colored suit folded neatly into the small tote bag I had brought with me. Putting it on, and realizing this was not going to be a "family style" dinner, I began to feel nervous. Given the kind of difficulty Akhmet would experience within his community if anything happened to me, I rationalized that it was safe enough to go. I was also propelled to go by the sense of lethargy and entrapment I felt after a long day in Jamila and Enver's living room with little prospect of interviewing the next day.

We climbed into Akhmet's pale green Mercedes and began chatting about the evening news. They had just broadcast a story about the mayor of a small town nearby who had been shot to death earlier that day along with some of his staff. Having expected Akhmet to shake his head in disapproval, I grew even tenser as he chuckled and smiled, another clue to proceed with caution. Akhmet took me to a local resort or tour base, which had a small restaurant surrounded by a terrace on the shores of a large, calm lake. There were also sports facilities, a hotel, and a swimming pool. As we strolled down a winding path toward the restaurant, the people that we passed greeted Akhmet with respect, bowing, with hand on heart, and then backing away. Many came up to him, kissed his hand, and placed it on their forehead. After being treated like a local dignitary, Akhmet explained that he came here often, to collect table scraps and meat for the bear he kept in a pen in his back yard. In fact, he had sometimes brought the bear here, on a leash. But this did not explain the fearful looks that he received, or just how his position had earned him such deference.

The restaurant itself was a relatively simple affair: white plastic tables and chairs on a terrace covered by a large, gazebo-like structure over a dance floor. We sat down at a table overlooking the lake, and Akhmet looked at one of the waiters and delicately raised a finger. The response was immediate. The waiter put down his tray and, hurdling over the plastic lawn chair in his way, ran to our table. Akhmet ordered a bottle of Tajik wine, "Black Eyes," to celebrate, saying "Don't worry [about drinking too much]. You will sleep here tonight." When he waved away my polite refusal, I sank deeper into my chair—Akhmet's way of operating in the world was disturbingly autocratic, and how I could extricate myself was particularly unclear.

The first toast, as we raised our glasses, was "To chance," because it was by chance that we met. This toast, along with the second one, "To relaxing," set the stage, framing our encounter as a coincidental one that had a potentially deep future. Akhmet said that next time, I would come
not to work, but to simply enjoy the beauty of the region; that would be what I would remember when I returned to the United States. The reference to relaxing is an important one, for it points to the way in which drinking is sometimes celebrated as a time outside of the routine and the structure of daily life. In this way, the toast positioned us on the same "side" as fugitives from the world of work and economically determined relations. But the point about relaxing was also inherently gendered. It was repeated at numerous times during my research in Central Asia that work was unhealthy for me as a woman. It would spoil me and render me unfit for marriage, the goal, as far as Akhmet was concerned, for every woman. Akhmet therefore saw my research as irrelevant in the larger scheme of life. "Science, after all, is men's work," he insisted.

Given his general lack of respect for my project, our conversations about my work were somewhat abbreviated. I mentioned, vaguely, that I planned to meet with some local elders. His reply, with a scornful look, was "Do you need that? Personally, I think that is the last thing that you need." That meant we had more time to talk about his work, as the head of the tax inspection department. Akhmet framed himself as different from his predecessors, but I suspect the department had been operating in a similar way for some time. Akhmet said he wanted to be known, liked, and respected, "as a person" outside his role. He said that he felt that if he were not on good terms with the people he had to relate with, then they would begin to say bad things about him, and this would make his work harder. He therefore cultivated collegial relations with his counterparts. This was evident when the head of the Tajik security services (formerly the KGB) came and greeted us at our table, grinning at Akhmet with his full set of gold teeth like a Cheshire cat. Akhmet clarified that his ability to make sure he is liked does not mean he is "soft." His allusions to having killed were only thinly veiled by euphemisms.

The third toast he raised was to eyes. This was in part by virtue of the fact that we were drinking "Black Eyes" wine. But it had also to do with eyes being the proverbial windows on the soul, and Akhmet's hope that the drinking encounter would bring about a level of intimacy. Akhmet had begun his efforts to meet my gaze in the car the day before, staring intently at me through the rear view mirror as the others dozed in the heat.

The fourth toast was "To purely women's happiness." By purely women's happiness, he meant the kind of happiness a woman experiences when she bows to her "true" nature as a feminine creature, concerned principally with the welfare of her family and children. Akhmet was incredulous that I had undertaken a project on the scope of an advanced degree, saying, "Honestly, with your hand on your heart, tell me you don't want women's happiness?"

The very notion of something that could be called women's happiness reveals an essentialized view of gender identity as something "natural" and "in the blood." The idea that I was doing a path of scholarship reflected a clear-cut sphere of men's and women's happiness was formed out of (being courted, becoming a wife, being a mother) who one married, who one was born, are all products of cultural and social constructs.

As for Akhmet, he described himself (with a term) until his mother arranged a match. He was a former student she knew well, a good man, and the wife's trust, but I soon learned that telling her where he was going. The idea about it, it was not infidelity. It could be she consciously knew what was being the system of trust and fidelity. When he kept in an apartment across town he phoned his wife and explained that he was sleeping, exhausted, at her because uncontrollable sexual appetites. It norms and Central Asian conventions treated as "healthy" and "normal." That is still technically illegal, there is nonetheless widespread.

The fifth toast was "To parents, who is part of a standard cultural script that is ancestors. Toasts to parents, mothers, and drinking rituals across the former Central drinking and toasts were very Soviet spin was the specific relations between and wives. The Central Asian dimension his very close relationship with his mother by her support of his sexual escapades and conventions. According to Islam, that belief kept Akhmet and his mother begins to worry if he does not cause, according to the Quran, one men's lips dry out," within about twenty-four weeks, he said that he saw her as often.

The sixth toast was "To love." This transformation: had I been in love? Was I and a way of spinning a world around to win me over? Would I fall in love with the knowledge that I had reached my mid
and “in the blood.” The idea that I was going against nature in following a path of scholarship reflected a gender ideology in which there are clear-cut spheres of men’s and women’s work and pleasure. The category of women’s happiness was formed out of experiences common to women (being courted, becoming a wife, bearing children, etc.). But these activities and responses to age-mates, who one marries, and when (if) one gives birth, are all products of cultural and religious traditions.

As for Akhmet, he described himself as something of a playboy (his term) until his mother arranged a marriage for him. The woman she chose was a former student she knew well. Akhmet said that he had never left his wife’s trust, but I soon learned that this was only by virtue of never telling her where he was going. The idea was that if she did not know about it, it was not infidelity. It could only be construed as infidelity if she consciously knew she was being betrayed. His mother reinforced this system of trust and fidelity. When he wanted to see his girlfriend, who he kept in an apartment across town, he simply phoned his mother. She phoned his wife and explained that he had arrived, been given dinner, and was sleeping, exhausted, at her home. The belief in men’s supposedly uncontrollable sexual appetites was funneled through his family’s norms and Central Asian conventions in such a way that his infidelity was treated as “healthy” and “normal.” While the practice of real polygyny is still technically illegal, there is considerable evidence that it is nevertheless widespread.

The fifth toast was “To parents, who bring us into the world.” This was part of a standard cultural script that prescribes honoring parents and ancestors. Toasts to parents, mothers, and fathers are a ubiquitous element of drinking rituals across the former Soviet Union. In this respect, our drinking and toasts were very Soviet. What gave them a Central Asian spin was the specific relations between children and parents, husbands and wives. The Central Asian dimension for my dinner companion was his very close relationship with his mother. In addition to being linked by her support of his sexual escapades, they were tied by religious norms and conventions. According to Islamic belief, the son must bury his parents. This belief kept Akhmet and his mother very close. Akhmet said his mother begins to worry if he does not visit her for a couple of days because, according to the Quran, one must bury the deceased “before the lips dry out,” within about twenty-four hours. Although they lived separately, he said that he saw her as often as his wife and children.

The sixth toast was “To love.” This was Akhmet’s opening to solicit information: had I been in love? Was I currently in love? With whom? It was also a way of spinning a world around us, ready for habitation. Would he win me over? Would I fall in love with him? Throughout Central Asia, the knowledge that I had reached my mid-thirties and was not only unmar-
ried but without children made me an anomaly, a person whose life begged for an explanation. My strange status was sometimes waved away with projections that these things were yet to come. At other times there were inflated assurances that they could, with a few conversations, "fix" me and provide a spouse. The idea that love often follows (rather than preceding) marriage seemed widespread. Once, when a man I barely knew proposed to me in Uzbekistan, I pointed out, "You don't know me and you can't possibly love me." His reply was, "Ah, but I will." I became fascinated with the calculations that went into marriage proposals. For example, a Tajik friend felt torn in choosing a bride. He was attracted to a girl from the country, who had a deformed foot, because he knew she would be loyal, subservient, and obedient. He also felt drawn to a woman who could provide better intellectual companionship, but he feared she would not stay with him for long.

The seventh toast was "To your (meaning my) health." On one level, this is a generic Soviet toast that shows concern for one's interlocutor. Toasts carrying hopes for health are ubiquitous across the region. But at another level, this toast was embedded in the gendered ideology that so dominated the milieu. I was frequently confronted by people who were concerned that if I remained childless, it could have serious health repercussions. In fact, I was often cautioned that if I failed to produce children, I should expect to get cancer and even die. So this toast also carried a question about my health and the extent to which I, as a single and childless person, was a "normal" and "healthy" woman.

The eighth toast was "To friendship," again, planting the seeds of an idea. And the ninth (and last) was "To meeting in the United States." Here, in the final toast of the evening, is revealed one of Akhmet's underlying goals and the overriding subtext of the conversation, which was to expand his personal ties. While he was in a position to simply purchase a ticket, his view of the way the world works was that it turns on personal ties. As such, there would inevitably be a way in which having me as a contact in the United States could advance his goals. As Pesman has argued (2000: 170) the idea of putting a bottle in front of someone to gain access to goods, services, or a promotion is a well-established aspect of Soviet life. But treating this as a bribe, or boiling it down to purely instrumental, economic terms is an oversimplification: drinking and the sharing of bottles is connected to the sense of exchange, of value, culture, and what it means to be a person in Soviet and post-Soviet life. As Pesman puts it, sharing a drink typically involves hours of sitting together. Deals are not only made, but transformed and coupled with a kind of intimacy that emerges from communication. Those who sit together can articulate their common interests.

As we sat and drank and talked, we looked out over the lake, which turned pale violet as the sun began to set. Across the lake, the lights of a small city began to twinkle, and we got up to walk down to the waves that were rippling against the shore. I reached down to feel the warm water. The proprietors of the restaurant turned a blind eye and asked not will you dance, but when will you finish the bottle of "Black Eyes." They tied me back to Enver and Jamila's house. We discussed about women's equality with men and the power differences between men and women in our encounter when Akhmet chose to handle things seriously, never asking, "Will you stop informing me again, "You will spend the rest of your life with me". The situation was my only recourse (giving me a laugh). My distress, Akhmet handed me around and then carried me, with a smile on his face, toward the lobby of the tour base. Once tested, Akhmet took "no" as "no," and later that evening we parted as a gentleman.

GENDER AND POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA

How does this encounter fit into a larger framework? Central Asia began experiencing the effects of the end of the Cold War with the inauguration of the Soviet republics. The initial compulsory education was introduced to ensure the educational needs of the rural population with the aim of transforming society. Part of this process was to create a new identity for the Soviet peoples. The goal, on the part of the Soviets, was to create a modern society, to the point of law, in the home, in education, and to some extent, the economy, the state was transformed to accommodate traditional elements.

As part of the reaction against the changes, traditional values are now being reinforced and the past is being brought back in. This process is too complex to describe in this space. There is a tendency towards greater respect for family connections. Also, many do not like the changes and are therefore not well equipped to adapt to the new reality. Women are in many ways more deeply affected by this process. While Soviet policies
an anomaly, a person whose life begged discussion was sometimes waved away with protests to come. At other times there were interruptions, with a few conversations, “fix” me and we will go on. There often follows (rather than preceding) a question about my health: “Are you going to take the bottle of “Black Eyes” before I told him it was time to take me back to Enver and Jamila’s house. While there was a great deal of discussion about women’s equality within the Soviet system, pronounced power differences between men and women persisted. This was reflected in our encounter when Akhmet chose not to take my refusal of his advances seriously, never asking, “Will you spend the night?” but simply informing me again, “You will spend the night.” Suspecting tact and diplomacy were my only recourse (given his gun), I told him I simply refused to even consider staying in the room he had reserved for me at the hotel. To my distress, Akhmet lifted me up off the ground, swung me around, and then carried me, with ease, up several flights of stairs towards the lobby of the tour base hotel. Fortunately, when I again protested, Akhmet took “no” as “no,” and folded this acceptance into an image of him as a gentleman.

GENDER AND POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA

How does this encounter fit into a history of gender relations in Tajikistan? Central Asia began experiencing increased pressure to modernize with the inauguration of the Soviet regime in the twentieth century. Universal compulsory education was introduced, there were efforts to establish medical and social service networks, and there was a push to secularize society. Part of this process was the campaign for female emancipation. The goal, on the part of the Soviets, was gender equality reflected in the law, in the home, in education, and at work. Although women’s choices were expanded, and there came to be more public roles for women, Soviet-style modernity was accepted at the same time that it was also transformed to accommodate traditional concepts (Akmen 1997:262).

As part of the reaction against the Soviet legacy, traditional cultural values are now being reinforced and Islam, in particular, is being called back in. This process is too complex and too contradictory to be understood as retrenchment. Central Asian men and women experience pulls in various directions. Some women have rejected the Soviet model of female emancipation in favor of what could be construed as traditional gender roles. There is also a tendency for Islamic norms of female modesty in dress and behavior to be reintroduced. But, as Akmen has argued (1997), women are in many ways more vulnerable than ever before: state protections are weak, posing a problem for those women without strong family connections. Also, many do not know their rights in Islamic law and are therefore not well equipped to negotiate either within or outside the family. While Soviet policies aimed to institute gender equality,
post-independence Tajikistan presents a complicated picture: the rejection of older Soviet norms becomes an important component of cultural nationalism and the reassertion of local traditions.

Akhmet was perhaps the most dangerous person I interacted with in five years of visits to the former Soviet Union. With one gun under the passenger seat of his car, and several more in his office, he was ready to take on virtually anyone. My glimpse of his life revealed a highly gendered world in which “science is men’s work” and the good, healthy women stayed home. The rhetoric of violence that underwrote his position was only too clear. He spoke of having “taken people out” and underlined his ability to stay in charge. His cruelty and desire to dominate were perhaps most evident in his relationship with his dog, a large German shepherd, whom he often kept locked up in the trunk of his car. The dog was deeply attached to him, and Akhmet played with this by forcing the dog to run in front of his car until his paws began to bleed from the pavement. Akhmet laughed with pleasure at the dog’s pain, and his ability to control the extent to which he was wounded. It was clear from other conversations that he would treat opponents in the same way. Men like Akhmet did not have power as much as they exercised it, enabled not only by a gender order that validated forms of oppression but also by the socioeconomic collapse that necessitated extralegal forms of income generation and the concomitant use of violence and means of control.

Akhmet’s construction of himself as male was built on forms of power he gathered as part of his position within the government. Men as soldiers, generals, and politicians were of course the major players in the Tajik civil war. But a form of violence that also supported the construction of masculinity and power in post-Soviet central Asia was the violence associated with Mafia or organized crime. In Tajikistan, there was importance placed on being a big or important man because, in the absence of the rule of law, it was only in wielding influence through personal connections that a great deal could be accomplished. According to several informants, one of the ways that the tax department routinely collected “revenue” was to go to the market, ask if the vendor had any harder currency, and when rubles or dollars turned up, confiscate them to line one’s own pockets. The money was believed to pass up the chain of command and compensate for low state salaries.

In the car on the way back to Enver’s house, I looked out over the mountains, which were glowing amber and pink against a violet sky. When I turned back, he was staring at me again from the driver’s seat and asked, “When are you going to become a woman?” “In what sense?” I replied. “In the sense that you don’t need all this” (and here he fell back on the speech fad of rhyming nonsense terms) science-schmience, history-schmistory.” For him, “becoming a woman” was more than sexual, having to do with abandoning my project, surrendering to an ostensibly pure and biologi-}

cally based femaleness. Akhmet’s project was to become a “wife.” Like Enver, he framed this within the rent of being a man (who can afford to keep them) to assure me that I would be very comfortable becoming a businesswoman. Here we see the Soviet tradition with modern realities and practices. Women are the least powerful in central Asia. Akhmet affirmed an unapologetic promotion of power and status, in the name of “national” interest. And he recognized women had important roles in the building of a new Tajik society.

CONCLUSION

The practices and ways of being in the public and women’s sense of them selves as equal in central Asia, masculinity in particular became entrenched in a political context that asserted things. Gender norms and gender identities were supported by other hierarchies of power and privilege. Central Asia is not reducible to ideas and practices, but also to traditions. There is a complex and ever-evolving relationship. For example, realizing that he had decided would be inadvisable for him to leave sufficient American women’s nearly empty seminar halls to take a piece of bread from my friend’s house safely. After a few moves, I saw him on his own. Attitudes with me, but their meaning seemed to sprout into being, fully formed, but evolving, and material realities coalesced. Everyday life in Central Asia reveals a position that has given new acceptability to the traditions that were considered outmoded and out of step with the globalized world.

REFERENCES

The dog was deeply attached to its owner, and the concomitant ability to channel power and status, in the name of “natural” difference at the same time that he recognized women had important abilities to channel toward the building of a new Tajik society.

CONCLUSION

The practices and ways of being in the world that serve to reinforce men and women’s sense of them selves as men and women are shifting. In Tajikistan, masculinity in particular seems to be produced and maintained in a political context that assumes a “natural” gender order to things. Gender norms and gender ideologies overlap with, and reinforce, other hierarchies of power and privilege. This being true, gender in Central Asia is not reducible to ideas and practices that are either modern or traditional. There is a complex and even contradictory consciousness involved. For example, realizing that he had drunk too much wine, Akhmet decided would be inadvisable for him to drive any further. Invoking self-sufficient American women’s nearly universal ability to drive, Akhmet handed me the keys. It was only at this moment, seated firmly behind the wheel, that I knew with any certainty that I would make it back to my friend’s house safely. After a few cups of coffee, Akhmet departed for his home on his own. Attitudes with respect to gender and power do not spring into being, fully formed, but emerge slowly out of the values, attitudes, and material realities coalescing out of the present and the past. Everyday life in Central Asia reveals a shift in which the post-Soviet transition has given new acceptability to the gendered attitudes and practices that were considered outmoded and suppressed. What balance will be struck between tradition and modernity is still unclear.

REFERENCES


As enduring or timeless as a local meal, or the domestic division of lab-

despective, these aspects of cultural life
tested, and changeable as all others.

As part of the tradition often come apart not
works of history, but also via consulta-
tions in a single household. Consulta-
ations are yet another benefit of cap-
reminding themselves not to take this

Because so many of us began our
the Soviet Union, we witnessed how
shifts taking place around them even
unwilling agents of change in terms
ility, and housework. Soviet ideology
virtually every aspect of social life, like
wedding feasts and choral spectacles
"bridized" these practices appeared. Now
courses as sovereign countries, citizens
in competing ideologies, across broad
communitarian, from secular to reli-
tunes and individuals’ socio-economic
to which continuity or changes are

In this section, chapters concentr

day life and, for example, public spe
Kazakh music and hospitality, the pr
bek and Kazakh villages, and the wa