

CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS

An Open Access Journal

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Volume 21, Issue 4

TRIBALISM IN KAZAKHSTAN: TRADITION REBORN OR SOCIAL INSTRUMENT

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DOI:: <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.20.4.04>

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ABSTRACT

The authors have chosen tribalism and its role in contemporary Kazakhstan as an object of their studies. Despite the official political course aimed at comprehensive modernization of the state and society, tribalism has not yet been marginalized. The opposite is true: it is on the rise, and thus remains one of the urgent subjects of social discussions. The authors have outlined the forms in which clan relationships manifest themselves in the political and social spheres of Kazakhstan.

An analysis of certain approaches to the studies of the country's ethnic and social structure is conducted and comparative analysis of the evolution of clan-and-tribal relations based on the methods of political science is proposed with the aim to identify its specifics in Kazakhstan's past and present.

The authors have presented the results of in-depth field polls carried out in several auls (villages) in 2020 to substantiate their hypothesis of the forms which clan relationships have assumed in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, tribal (clan) ties, tribe, zhuz, clan, tribalism, patron-client relationships, nomadism.

Introduction

Having acquired independence, Kazakhstan, like all other post-Soviet states, should have acquired a new nation and a new state. Indeed, independence demanded a consolidated polyethnic society and civilian identity. However, an opposite trend is currently unfolding in the republic's social, political and cultural life: the society is gradually differentiating, while tribalism has received a new lease of life. This makes it much harder to arrive at a common national identity, as the memory of the past, of the nomadic way of life and tribalism is being revived.¹ It comes to life as an active and widespread revival of traditions such as funeral repast (*ases*) dedicated to prominent *batyrs* (heroes) and public figures of the past to which clan nobility is invariably invited,² the large and growing number of internet sites with clan and family genealogies (*shezhire*),³ identification of belonging to a clan by DNA,⁴ etc.



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Today, the question of the extent to which clan ties and their outcrops (tribalism) have struck root in the new system of social and political relations has stirred up great scholarly, social and political interest. The subject of clan relations that have been gradually emerging throughout the entire period of newly acquired independence has already attracted the attention of mainly foreign (Western) researchers. The community of Western scholars of Kazakhstan and Central Asia is actively discussing the importance, place and role of clan relationships in Kazakhstan. Edward Schatz (Canada) has written, in particular: “The more that Central Asian states continue the trends of the late 1990s and early years after 2000, the less likely it is that clan will disappear as a political phenomenon.”⁵ He is convinced that clan relationships were very much alive, albeit latently, in the Soviet Union. In addition, he has concluded that clan relationships are present in the corridors of power and recommends to skillfully integrate them in politics instead of sweeping them under the carpet.⁶

This opinion is not unanimously supported in Kazakhstan: those who disagree believe that clan-tribal connections in the political and social spheres have lost their consequence long ago. Aidos Sarym, one of those who disagree has written: “In Kazakhstan the fact of belonging to a clan does not bring privileges or bonuses and does not guarantee access to national riches.”⁷ Daniar Ashimbaev, the well-known author of Kazakhstan encyclopedia *Kto est kto v Kazakhstane* (Who is Who in Kazakhstan) that contains over 8,500 biographies of members of the Kazakhstan elite over the last 100 years, is of the same opinion: “Today, however, this role belongs to personal relationships, rather than to the fact of belonging to a certain clan.”⁸

This means that the expert community is divided on the issue of the importance of clan relationships in contemporary Kazakhstan society. It seems that the problem emerges due to the absence of an objective scientific assessment of the means of restoration and integration of traditional clan-tribal relations models in social realities. A concise analysis of the evolution stages in clan relations in Kazakhstan is needed to find an answer to the question of how and for what purposes is the system of clan- and-tribal relations being revived? This is very important: this system contradicts the focus on modernization and the proclaimed aim of joining the group of 30 most developed states of the world.⁹

It is equally significant to understand how clan relationships were revived/eliminated and how they are used today. The answers have not been found so far. Our article is yet another attempt at identifying the role and place of clan relations in contemporary Kazakhstan society: whether clan relationships are an unofficial model of social relationships accepted by the majority or a rudiment that does not have a place in the contemporary social order and, therefore, is used as an instrument in certain situations?

Scholarly Approaches to the Studies of Clan Relationships Among the Kazakhs

Concepts clans and zhuzes are very similar; they belong to the same system in which zhuzes occupy the highest level in the hierarchy, followed by big clan-tribes at the lower level and sub-clans at the lowest. All Kazakhs belong to one of three zhuzes: Senior, Middle or Junior; each of them comprises several big tribal unions which, in turn, consist of numerous clans and, correspondingly, sub-clans.

An understanding of why our society is still clinging to this social structure requires an explanation of why it has survived through the centuries. In the absence of authentic written sources related to the origins of zhuzes and clans, we will analyze several approaches to the subject.

According to the most popular, zhuzes and clans were created to divide the territory of the Kazakh steppe. Sanjar Asfendiarov, who studies the history of the Kazakh nomads, wrote that zhuzes were the result of the specific economic, cultural and historical features associated with the natural division of the territory of Kazakhstan into three zones: Semirechie, Western and Central regions.¹⁰ In her article on tribalism in contemporary Kazakhstan Saulesh Esenova, likewise, arrives at a conclusion that tribes appeared because of territorial distribution of pastures.¹¹ Each tribe (clan) had a territory occupied by its members; all nomads were fully aware of the geographical distribution of all neighboring clans. It follows that the zhuz division was suggested by natural and climatic conditions and landscapes (mountains, rivers and pastures).

Historian Sultan Akimbekov offers a different hypothesis. He explains the division into zhuzes by the Marxist theory of formations, according to which the Kazakh territories were the foundation of material production. He proposes a new approach: the zhuz and the clan (tribal) system were based on politics; the Kazakh zhuzes did not appear due to economic necessity, but had taken shape in the struggle against aggressive Jungar tribes. Confronted with this threat, the Mogols (the Senior Zhuz), Kazakhs (the Middle Zhuz) and Nogais (the Junior Zhuz), whose language, economic habits and culture were fairly similar, joined ranks.¹²

Today, there is no balance between the clan and, especially, zhuz affiliation. Having analyzed the zhuz structure of the ruling Kazakh political elite of the early 2000s, Nurlan Amrekulov has registered the domination of the Senior Zhuz.¹³ It seems that affiliation with any of the zhuzes and clans is not particularly important in contemporary Kazakhstan.

There is also another approach to the problem which associates the clan-tribal stratification with the way of life and culture of nomadic society. Severe conditions of the steppe, the need to change camps and pastures every season had taught nomads that



survival, successful cattle breeding and, hence, wealth required experience (that was passed from one generation to another) and cohesion (in the form of a family, clan and tribe hierarchy).¹⁴ Fathers bequeathed to their sons not only cattle but also a certain type of sociality: everyday survival experience, oral culture and traditions as the cornerstone of their lifestyle. This made blood and genealogical ties highly important or even sacral.

Kazakh ethnicity is rooted in nomadic culture that knew no writing; it was strongly affected by their way of life and gradually transformed Kazakhs into a very distinct ethnic group.

Today, however, this lifestyle does not fit into the patterns of market economy and globalization. To survive in the severe conditions of the steppe Kazakhs have relied on the experience of the older generation. Today, it is no longer required. Ties between generations and inside clans, the skills and experience of the elders are gradually losing their consequence and value. Sometimes, however, they crop up in various circumstances: people may be hired only because they belong to a certain clan. Kazakhstan historian Alimkhan Nurekeev has written that all top positions are occupied by relatives of the boss despite their highly questionable professional qualities; they are reliably protected by the “iron-strong clan-zhuz relationships and the origin from the same locality.”¹⁵ On the whole, tribalism, corruption and nepotism are condemned by Kazakhstan society ... and remain a more or less common phenomenon.¹⁶

In the early years of independence, the persistent problems of the republic’s agriculture pushed huge numbers of villagers to cities to make them a melee of members of different zhuzes and clans. This destroyed the old system of territorial division into zhuzes and clans and, according to historical logic, should have lowered the value of ties between generations. Today, however, clan and tribal ties are apparent in all spheres of life. Kazakhstan political scientist Rustem Kadyrzhanoğlu has pointed out that “as long as the Kazakhs as a nation survive, tribalism will not disappear.”¹⁷ The question is: how do clan-tribal relationships survive and by what means?

The manifestation of this phenomenon in social and political life is negatively assessed by many. It seems that Kazakhs are still using the clan relationship model to achieve the best results offered by the new market relations; their ancestors did the same in the extreme conditions of the Kazakh steppe. Today, having left behind several cardinal social, political and economic transformations, they are confronted by a new market ideology that resolutely rejects the patrimonial formulas of traditional consciousness.

Today, Kazakhstan is in a transitional stage: Soviet values are no longer important, while new values have not yet struck root in human minds—it is a state in which traditionalism, suppressed at Soviet times, may be revived,¹⁸ albeit in a non-classical form. It will be rather a latent activation of clan-tribal ties in the interests of individuals and groups. Nurbulat Masanov, a well-known expert in nomadism and related phenomena, uses the term “quasi-tribalism” for the situations in which people exploit their belonging to a clan for their personal purposes. In this way they establish partnerships of different types based not so much on economic interests, but on an awareness of one’s moral and ethical duty supported by “sacral” archetypes. Masanov regards these relationships as a resource for the minimization of various risks and acquiring additional competitive advantages.¹⁹

To identify the extent to which clan relationships are present in contemporary Kazakhstan society, we have formulated the following questions: How has the role of clan relationships changed? Are they still important? How often do people use their belonging to any clan?

We have hypothesized that clan-tribal relations are losing their traditional value and are used to establish and maintain loyal relationships, to promote individual interests and achieve political and economic aims at different levels of social and political hierarchy.

Clan Relationships Among the Kazakhs at Different Historical Periods

In the past, clan-tribal ties were the key feature of Kazakh ethnicity. Clan ties were an absolute priority in the social, political, cultural and economic processes unfolding in the traditional Kazakh society, and served as distribution channels for knowledge, information, resources and property. Social position, authority, reputation and even one’s place at the table were determined by clan affiliations.²⁰

Clan elders (*bais*) and their closest circle—judges (*biis*) and military commanders (*batyrs*)—headed traditional Kazakh auls and their populations. In Soviet times, it was commonly believed that *bais* had exploited and cheated other members of their clans.²¹ In later works, however, they are shown as kind and selfless protectors of the poor whom they offered employment and housing.²²

Kazakhstan political scientist Zhamsylyk Sabitov has written the following to explain the structure and functions of the clan: “At that time clan and sub-clan played the role of corporations or at least privately held corporations of our days.”²³ Each of its members had certain assets in the form of pastures and cattle. The head of the clan, the elder (*aksakał*) was traditionally respected by practically all members of the clan, distributed pasture plots, decided when seasonal roaming should begin,



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resolved contradictions and helped the needy. On the whole, clans were tightly knitted: if somebody had problems, others were ready to help with their “assets”; on the other hand, if a member violated traditions and rules he may have been deprived of his “assets” and even driven out of his aul.

From the 19th century onwards, clan relationships have been gradually losing their importance: Kazakh lands were actively incorporated into the Russian Empire; Russian laws were adjusted to the relationships with the nomads living on the margins of the empire. The clan system lost some of its competences, while clan relationships lost some of their importance in the social, political and economic spheres.²⁴

The power of the khans was completely liquidated (in 1822, in the Middle Zhuz and two years later, in the Junior Zhuz) and replaced with the power of sultans: there were sultans who ruled districts, uyezds and villages. As a rule, they were selected from among the nobility—*aksuyek* (“white bone”); in the course of time this principle lost all of its importance: any influential and rich person without an impressive list of noble ancestors to his name could become a sultan.²⁵ According to certain sources, 16 out of 43 sultans in the Western Siberian District did not belong to nobility.²⁶

By the end of 1860, the posts of sultan-ruler and sultan were liquidated, which means that the power held by the Kazakhs shrank to the local level. Special stamps replaced the clan symbols, which disappeared from official documents.²⁷ By the early 20th century, therefore, clan-tribal relations and the associated administrative model and symbols lost their legitimacy. Imperialist ideology was gradually and persistently replacing the system of clan relationships. The clan leader lost much of his former powers: he was no longer responsible for land-related problems, distribution of pastures and settlement of major conflicts within his clan and between clans.

In the early 20th century, several revolutions that followed one another destroyed the political system of the Russian Empire and finally brought Bolsheviks to power. They did not hesitate to impose a sedentary mode of life on the nomads, causing hunger and numerous deaths among them.²⁸ The structure of Kazakh auls was destroyed along with the foundations of the social order of the Kazakhs as the cornerstone of the nomadic way of life.

The new power outlawed the system of clan relationships and *shezhire* as backward and archaic and evidence of bourgeois nationalism, and proclaimed the *bais* system to be a vestige of the past.²⁹ The Kazakhs, however, preserved information about the seven generations of their ancestors—*Zheti ata*—and bequeathed it to younger generations. The past clan unity and mutual assistance among clan members developed into different forms of social ties. In their altered form, they became patron-client relationships based not only on the clan system, but also on various social categories, such as the same place of origins within the republic, studying, working or living at the same place, etc. and were very popular in Soviet times.³⁰ They survived, in latent forms, in independent post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

Independence and the political, demographic, social and cultural changes allowed more open discussions of the problems of genealogy (*shezhire*) and clan relations. People invariably tried to find out the clan affiliation of a candidate, an official appointed to a top post, members of work or university collectives, a party leader, an official, a future relative or even an acquaintance. Students and young employees do not hesitate to ask their professors or bosses³¹ about their clans, which is a purely personal question.³²

In big cities an interest in clan ties is apparent; it speaks volumes about the situation in the countryside, where the traditions of clan relationships have been preserved to an even greater extent.

Field Studies in the Villages of Almaty Region

In order to verify the above, we carried out field sociological studies in the Kazakh auls of the Almaty Region.

We wanted to study local attitudes to, assessments of and opinions about the current role of clan relationships. Our studies were based on the qualitative methods used in sociology and social anthropology: in-depth interviews and participant observation that allowed us to acquire information on the causes of transformation of traditional relations in contemporary Kazakhstan society.

Planned as a field project and scheduled for the spring of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic it (or part of it) was realized online through the popular messengers WhatsApp and Skype in the following villages of the Almaty Region: Kasymbek, Koktobe, Yintymak and Masak (today Kaztaia Ultarakova). They were selected as highly typical of Kazakhstan, where ethnic Kazakh population was not diluted by other ethnic groups or, at least where Kazakhs are dominant among other ethnicities. Sampling was conducted in the villages with populations of up to 5,000 situated at a distance of 100-150 km from the regional center.

They are typical Kazakh villages in which traditional relations have been preserved to the highest degree; in most of them one or several clans live in compact groups in one village, that is, they resemble to the greatest extent the traditional Kazakh ethno-social structure of the past. A city or a town that attracts people of different clans and zhuzes from all parts of the country is a



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different matter. However, we selected the villages that were fairly close to Almaty, one of the country's megalopolises to trace down social ties and assess their consistency.

We carried out 5 to 7 in-depth interviews with people of different ages (to find out what different generations thought about tribalism) in each of the villages, selected by random sampling from among the local ethnic Kazakhs: 25% were people of the elder generation (60+); 35%, middle-aged (45+) and 40%, the younger generation (18+).

In this way we have discovered an interesting fact: the elder generation was very much troubled by the fact that the youth demonstrated practically no interest in clan relationships, they pushed aside *shezhire* (genealogy) and were convinced that historical memory is no longer relevant today.

“Our ancestors cherished clan ties; we cherish them to a lesser extent, while our children even less so. They dismiss them as unimportant, they have other values.” (Kazakh woman, 51, village of Kaztaia Ultarakova)

Some of the respondents were aware of the histories of their families; some had genealogical books (*shezhire*); others found the subject boring, outdated or even dangerous as one that leads to tribalism, disunity and conflicts among Kazakhs.

Following an analysis of the information obtained from the respondents, it became relatively clear that clan relationships were mostly connected with culture and traditions such as exogamy, respect for ancestors and knowledge of history.

“Clan is the memory of the past, of your origins; you should know your seven grandads and should not marry a girl from the same clan.” (Kazakh man, 65, Kasymbek)

We obtained very similar results during the field studies of social ties in villages across Kazakhstan³³ carried out in 2013-2014 on an order of the Institute of World Economics and Politics under the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

On the other hand, we have detected the role of economic factors in preserving clan ties in the form of patron-client relationships. This was pretty obvious: employers were more lenient to their employees who belonged to the same clan and tried to attract the young and talented from their clans in the first place.

“He is a talented boy from a good family, it turned out that he belongs to my clan. I can hire him without a trace of doubt.” (Kazakh man, 33, village of Kaztaia Ultarakova)

It is much easier to establish mutually advantageous relations between members of the same clan:

“Yes, we help when we can. We are from the same clan, after all. If he needs help, an agricultural machine for example, I will be ready to help.” (Kazakh man, 58, village of Yintymak)

In the course of field studies, we often heard from our respondents that clan ties were important, but not enough to promote one's own aims or establish friendly relations of mutual trust. Social factors such as belonging to groups of classmates, colleagues or neighbors were just as important.

“Today, any contacts are precious, be it among relatives or members of the same clan or among classmates or colleagues. The main thing is to find common ground—this will change everything.” (Kazakh man, 47, village of Kasymbek)

“It turned out that he had served in the army together with my elder brother. I was a small boy at that time and did not remember him. We found common ground at once.” (Kazakh man, 64, village of Yintymak)

From this it follows that clan relationships as well as all other personal ties (informal relations between classmates, fellow students, colleagues, neighbors, etc.) can be used to promote one's interests. Once connections (social ties) are found, a favorable social status or loyal attitude is just a matter of time. This means that clan-tribal relations remain one of the factors on par with others.

Having analyzed clan policies in Kazakhstan on the basis of her 2007 studies, Barbara Junisbai, associate professor at Pitzer College (U.S.), has concluded that clans do not consist of people of the same clan.³⁴ Kazakhstan political scientist Daniar Ashimbaev, one of the best experts in the problems of clan affiliation of members of the Kazakh elite, said in one of the interviews that in politics clans unite people from different clans.³⁵ This confirms our hypothesis that today clan relationships are gradually losing their social and cultural value and their traditional meanings to become one of the types of informal relationships to be used for different purposes up to and including the promotion of one's interests.



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Conclusion

The contemporary global development trends—social, cultural and market modernization among them—are highly visible in Kazakhstan, even if not all groups of its population have accepted them as a factor that improves the quality of life. They stir up opposition and activate traditionalism in the form of revived clan relationships, among others.

A review of the changes in the social clan-tribal relationship model and the way it has changed when the Kazakh steppe became part of the Russian Empire, of the Soviet Union and then an independent state was conducted. Several approaches to the studies of clan relationships were analyzed to better understand the specifics of clan and zhuz formation. These three approaches can be implemented, since they reveal different aspects of the emergence of the clan tie phenomenon, its models associated with blood kinship, the territory and the way of life, politics at the republican and regional levels, etc. Today, these models and their studies are not in demand in the official political discourse and are highly important at the local level of everyday life. They do not fit the market and liberal development models, yet are fairly efficiently used in the traditional Kazakh practices to attract additional resources to families (households), reliable contacts and relationships that help them survive and develop.

The logic of the genesis, development and gradual fading-out of the importance of clan contacts in the context of Kazakhstan modernization, leads to believe that the functional and symbolic importance of the clan-tribal structure should be pushed aside and condemned to oblivion in contemporary society. In real life, however, tribalism demonstrates its importance and viability, therefore, its contemporary forms in Kazakhstan should be clearly identified. The answers we received from village residents and an analysis of media publications revealed that clan ties are realized mainly as quasi-tribalism. Our field studies have confirmed that people in Kazakhstan use clan and tribal relations in the same way as other social ties: formal and informal groups of colleagues, those who served in the army together, came from the same locality, studied at the same time in the same university, live in the same house, etc. Clan ties per se are cultural and historical heritage that should be protected as the nation's historical memory.

Kazakhstani researchers should move further in their studies of the Kazakh ethnicity by analyzing in detail the social ties where the traditional relationships within the Kazakh ethno-social structure play either ethno-differentiating or ethno-integrating roles. Individual cases with a considerable amount of empirical data may present a special interest for theoretical generalizations on a much greater scale. This data may clarify the place and role of clan relationships among social ties and in the political space of intra- and inter-ethnic relations.

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³ See [\[Link\]](#). [Back to text](#)

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