

“SHOW ME RESPECT”. DISCOURSES ABOUT THE PARALLEL ECONOMY, KINSHIP, AND CORRUPTION IN CAUCASIAN COMMUNITIES.

Summary

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Following the downfall of the Soviet administrative system and the collapse of the ruble, trust in official social institutions fell sharply among people in the Caucasus region. The “stability” of economic life in the Soviet Union became a thing of the past. Under these conditions, the role of informal economic activity in the strategies of households and individuals has increased to the point where it is now a key survival mechanism. The economic vacuum that was created by the weakening and ultimate collapse of old state institutions, together with destructive wars and conflicts, has given a new impulse to “rooted” social relations and personal support networks.

This paper uses anonymized description to provide a general analysis of these practices as observed across the Caucasus. Our expectation is that readers with a Caucasian background will recognize their own practices without being able to identify the specific culture or subculture that is being described in each case. Examples are drawn from Abkhaz, Georgian, Megrelian, Azeri, Kurdish, Lezgin, Meskhetian Turkish, Armenian, Karabagh Armenian, Hemshin, Ossetian, Adyge, Udi, Ingilo, Yezidi, Talysh and some other communities. The purpose of anonymization is to avoid finger-pointing and ethnic stigmatization and to draw attention to regional patterns.

The subjects of our analysis are kinship groups (patrilineal households) and other quasi-kinship structures or units, the dynamics of reciprocal relations within them, and their micro-economy in the late Soviet period. What is peculiar about the communities studied are their specific modes of interdependence between certain features of everyday life and social structure, including both uses of social networks and systems of morality and ideology.

The first peculiarity is the high status of common law in contrast to formal, codified rules. In examining discourses and practices of kinship and the micro-economy of patrilineal households, we try not to simplify these phenomena, especially the rules of gift-giving and reciprocity. It is important to avoid reducing the variety of modes of gift-giving to simple instrumentality. At the same time we can observe

a rationalization of relationships within kinship networks. We suppose that this rationalization is a way of instrumentalizing emotional relationships that transforms trusting and altruistic behavior into manipulation. The cases we analyze show that stable and legitimate access to resources of power and wealth serves to legitimize the abuse of traditional patterns of behavior. At the very least, a person can choose behavioral strategies as he or she becomes more independent from the community while simultaneously remaining dependent on officials. In joining the local elite, such people look for ties and communication with the higher-level elite in the capital, reproducing patron-client relationships. However, they are unable to distance themselves from the old networks completely. What kind of behavioral patterns does this create? How do people convert network capital into financial capital? According to our observations, a range of special techniques are employed to enable the full transformation of a network resource into a monetary one. The article offers micro-analyses of the strategies of a tax inspector, a high-ranking police officer, a minister, and a dominant relative. The goal is to understand how a person's choice of a rational strategy—as opposed to inertly following normative rules—varies with the social category to which he or she belongs.

The second peculiarity is that symbolic values are undoubtedly involved in these exchanges as well, via the mutual influence of the belief system and social and economic relations. The inseparability of public political and private spheres in the societies under investigation has produced new forms of patrimonialism, and as a result, the state is governed as if it was the private property of the ruling elites. The article attempts to show the roots of this attitude in the structure of Caucasian communities by drawing on ethnographic observation as well as discourse and conversation analysis and a discussion of idioms in different Caucasian languages.

The third peculiarity is that political activity and the quest to obtain political power appear in these communities as means of legitimate access to social goods rather than as opportunities to change society for the better. Political power is a way of legitimizing advantages within the social structure. It is considered a useful addition to one's own personal property. This attitude characterizes these communities as neopatrimonial. The patrimonial logic of these relationships, in which power is a form of property, functions according to the formula "resources equal power, lack of resources equals dependency." These neopatrimonial relationships and forms of nepotism are very difficult to explicate because they are embodied and institutionally incorporated into the culture of Caucasian communities.

The paper investigates these three peculiar features of Caucasian communities from the perspective of cultural anthropology. The overall purpose is to provide explanations for the "idiosyncrasies" and seeming irrationality of the South Caucasus without engaging in normative moralizing, and to show how they are linked to universal models common to the so-called Third World.