

## TROUBLED RELATIONS: MOBILITY AND EXCHANGE IN POST-SOVIET KYRGYZSTAN



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**Accounts of gift exchange and hospitality focus on how networks of obligation produce social solidarity. When gift exchange involves hostility and misunderstanding, it is still viewed as extending social relationships. This article describes exchange encounters that either index a lack of relationship (where one or both of the parties assumed one) or ended a relationship. Although each encounter is unique, all involve people who are mobile, coming from communities of varied positions within global hierarchies. These encounters challenge standard assumptions about the relationship between exchange and social cohesion, and offer insight into the complex ways people figure relatedness in a world increasingly characterized by blurred boundaries and economic polarization. (Gift exchange, hospitality, globalization, former Soviet Union, Central Asia)**

Since Marcel Mauss's classic essay on the gift (1950[1990]), anthropologists have been interested in the productive and transformative nature of exchange. Gift giving creates and preserves value (Munn 1986), hierarchy (Yan 2002), peace (Sahlins 1963), social capital (Putnam 2000:134), and power (Sahlins 1963). According to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969[1967]), culture itself is a product of the social solidarity resulting from marital exchanges. Gift giving, anthropologists have long recognized, is not what its name implies—goods transferred with no thought of return, or what Mary Douglas (1990) calls the “free gift.” Instead, gift giving creates networks of obligation. “Although gifting interactions must appear voluntary and disinterested, this altruism actually masks a sense of obligation to receive and return,” writes Caldwell (2004:89). By creating obligation, exchange builds community and sustains social groups. It strengthens affection and deflates ill-will.

Exchange does not always work smoothly. Often, it produces tension and danger and makes both giver and receiver vulnerable. A gift can be disguised coercion, a self-serving gesture (Grant 2009). In many accounts of even the most hostile types, exchange contributes to overall social viability. For example, among Greek animal thieves, raiding is the first step in becoming “spiritual kin and allies” (Herzfeld 1987:79). Grant (2009:157) describes how a history of violence between Russia and the Caucasus has bound these regions ever more closely. He suggests that forced and troubled exchanges inaugurate relationships that can never find closure, turning divided histories forever into united ones.

Numerous scholars have noted that a globalized world is increasingly characterized by the blurring of boundaries and the hybridization of identities (Beck 2000:72–77; Gupta and Ferguson 1997:48; Kearney 1995:558; Piot 1999:23). “Native” anthropologists challenge easy notions of “native” and “foreign,” “home” and “field site,” recognizing that cultural boundaries are inherently problematic and often transgressed (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1988; Nakhleh 1979; Narayan 1993; Shahrani 1994). While these discussions have proven an important corrective to earlier place-based field projects and bounded notions of culture, the study of exchange suggests that in an increasingly globalized world, boundaries become more important. “Hospitality, ostensibly an act of generosity, may be competitive or even hostile, and it serves to draw a line between insiders and outsiders that always carries the implicit threat of violence if all does not go well” (Herzfeld 1997:81).<sup>1</sup> As global hierarchies become starker, individuals draw on available cultural resources (such as gift-exchange norms) to help them navigate relationships that may threaten their sovereignty, authority, or well-being. This essay presents stories of troubled exchange among individuals from communities occupying varied positions within global hierarchies. It considers what is at stake for the parties, and how they improvise on standard tropes of exchange to establish social boundaries and/or promote their own well-being.

#### CENTRAL ASIAN HOSPITALITY

Travelogues going back to the eighteenth century, as well as accounts by contemporary journalists and military personnel, idealize Eastern hospitality and the prodigious acts of generosity it dictates. Central Asia sits squarely in this “hospitality belt.” The Central Asian code of hospitality dictates that anyone who visits a home on legitimate business be offered tea, bread, and whatever else the host has on hand. If a hot meal is being prepared, the guest must be offered that as well. Furthermore, food and drink must be offered with the proper decorum. The guest should be shown where to sit at the tablecloth (Kyrgyz, *dastorkon*<sup>2</sup>); the tea should be ceremoniously mixed and poured; the bread should be broken by the man of the house and spread around the tablecloth; and a plate of hot food, if available, should be placed at the center of the table, equally accessible to all.

The guest, too, has certain obligations. The guest must display the proper demeanor, maintaining an attitude of humility and passivity. “*Konok koidon joosh*” (“the guest is more docile than a sheep”), says a popular maxim in Kyrgyz, the Central Asian language I used most in the field. The guest submits herself to the will of her hosts in order to demonstrate her trust and

respect for them. The guest should sit where her hosts tell her to sit, eat only after multiple urgings from a host to do so, and get up when her hosts give her leave. The guest makes no special requests, hoping the hosts will anticipate any urgent needs. In a well-appointed house, she will not even have to hold up her teacup to request a refill, as a host will ensure it is never empty. Rather than thanking the hosts directly, the guest will offer a blessing (Kyrgyz, *bata*), in which she expresses her desires for the hosts' well-being. Although it would be unseemly for the guest to mention having a sense of obligation to the hosts, the hosts can now consider the guest in their debt and may call on her for a favor or reciprocal hospitality without shame.

These practices are discursively linked to spiritual beliefs. The guest is holy, many Central Asians told me. Even guests who arrive unannounced must be graciously received and generously hosted. Turning away a visitor is a dangerous spiritual offense. Guests bring *yrysky* (Kyrgyz for "good fortune") or *bereke* (Kyrgyz for "blessings"). According to a popular saying, a guest should be considered older than the eldest man of the house, and treated with respect accordingly.

Although explicit promises of reciprocation are unseemly, the expectation of reciprocity is strong. The individual who does not honor his obligations will be the object of gossip and criticism. An Uzbek tale tells of a mother who chastises her grown son because he wants to give money he has saved to his wife so that she can go shopping. His mother reminds him of gifts and money his family has received that year in the course of various rituals and celebrations. She reminds him that these are obligations that must be repaid before he can consider his money his own (Ismatulla 2001:24–25).

These ideals of hospitality create high expectations and high demands. Families must be prepared at any time to receive guests, and when a guest comes, they must be willing to offer the guest generously of whatever they have. Exchange is not inherently a friendly affair; it opens a space for competition and criticism. Guests will just as surely complain to others in the community about a host's stinginess as they will offer effusive blessings at the end of that host's meal. Even as my Kyrgyz friends grumbled that their relatives expected generous labor-intensive hospitality, they would comment after visiting those same relatives that the hosts did not cook food with enough meat, provide comfortable beds, or otherwise tend to them satisfactorily.

#### CENTRAL ASIA TODAY

The exchanges described here took place while I was living in the Kyrgyz Republic, a small, formerly Soviet nation that lies on the eastern edge of Central Asia, sharing a border with China. Kyrgyzstan is a nation of 5.5

million people,<sup>3</sup> comprising numerous ethnic groups,<sup>4</sup> languages, and religions. According to 1999 figures, 65 percent of the population is Kyrgyz. Seventy-five percent of the population identifies as Muslim. I lived there a total of four years, first as a Peace Corps Volunteer (1997–1999), and then to do dissertation research (2003–2005).

Since independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstani citizens have experienced profound economic and political insecurity. Two presidents have been ousted by movements critical of their corruption and oppressive policies. The current regime, led by the former opposition leader and diplomat Roza Otunbayeva, is so weak it was unable to prevent bloody ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan, which climaxed in June 2010 (ICG 2010). The republic's withdrawal from the Soviet Union and the neoliberal reforms imposed on it by world financial institutions resulted in a drastic reduction in the availability and quality of social services, as well as growing poverty, high unemployment, and corruption. Poverty hovers around 40 percent. With a per capita GDP of \$2,200, the republic is the second poorest in Central Asia (after Tajikistan).

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new, capitalist discourses that encourage people to depend on and conserve their own resources rather than participate in social networks of redistribution have become more compelling. Most Central Asians, however, cannot afford to embrace these ideals. Current scholarship about the former Soviet Union reveals that people in the region remain dependent on social networks that facilitate the redistribution of resources to help them survive an economic crisis (Caldwell 2004; Gullette 2010; Howell 1994; Humphrey 2002; Kandiyoti 1998; Werner 1997). Floating parties called *gaps* and ritual feasts called *tois* are two popular exchange venues that reinforce values (co-operation and sharing) people depend on in a time of economic insecurity and increasing inequality (Kandiyoti 1998; Werner 1997). Indigenous exchange traditions define and reinforce a sense of community among relatives, neighbors, and friends who struggle with new economic realities.

Even as exchange networks have become more important to survival, they have become more fraught. Since the structures of Soviet socialism were dismantled, socio-economic inequality has increased. Because sociality and exchange are so intimately intertwined, one's ability to keep up with one's exchange obligations affects one's social relationships. Central Asians are sensitive to social slights they attribute to relative wealth. Some consciously withdraw from social networks that have become too costly, or neglect poorer relations who in their view take advantage of their generosity. I examine similar dynamics in the stories below, although these focus on individuals occupying disparate positions in global socio-economic hierarchies. The

actors in these stories disagree about the types of exchange demanded by certain relationships and in certain contexts. They manipulate local exchange norms in unconventional ways that destabilize community or betray the illusion of whatever community had been assumed.

### INEQUALITY AND EXCHANGE

The first exchange I describe occurred when I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Jalalabat, a provincial capital in the south of the Kyrgyz Republic. I was living with a Kyrgyz family. One afternoon, I was home with the two younger children when I heard banging on the gate. An elderly couple stood outside. They introduced themselves as Talant<sup>5</sup>-*baike*<sup>6</sup> and Tursun-*eje*,<sup>7</sup> and said they were friends of my “host parents”<sup>8</sup> from Komsomol, the village my host family is from and where many of their relatives still live. I told them no one was home, and then noticed my host mother, Salamat-*eje*, approaching from a distance, surrounded by a group of neighborhood women.

As Salamat approached, I saw she had a grim expression on her face. I could not tell if she was unhappy because she had just come from a funeral observance or if she was upset about having unexpected guests. She and other members of the household often complained that for half the year, when the dangerous mountain road between Jalalabat and Komsomol was traversable, their home became a *gastinitsiya* (Russian for “hotel”). Because there were only a handful of families in Jalalabat from Komsomol, people from the village with business in Jalalabat often came to our gate expecting food and a bed.

The visitors rarely betrayed any awareness that their visits were an inconvenience. In Komsomol, Kyrgyz ideals of hospitality are particularly strong. Aside from reinforcing social connection, receiving guests brings honor to a family and provides an opportunity to exchange news. The visitors to our gate probably assumed their visits benefited everyone: the visitors avoided paying for a hotel and restaurant and the hosts had a chance to catch up on village gossip and reinvigorate their ties with the village. Coming from an underdeveloped region where technological comforts were few and time in great supply, the visitors probably underestimated the physical inconvenience their visits posed for my family. They probably assumed the extra work was negligible when there is easy access to electricity, water, gas, and other conveniences. The financial inconvenience, similarly, probably did not concern them. Coming from a poor region where people have little cash, they would view anyone living in the city as wealthy.

Busy, urban professionals, my host parents resented these visits. My host parents were perpetually stressed and exhausted, preoccupied with children,

housework, jobs, and making ends meet. Money was always tight, so visitors were a financial burden. For people who badly needed rest, visitors also meant extra work. Extra food had to be prepared, beds had to be made, water heated, and extra dishes and linens would need washing. Furthermore, this hospitality would benefit my host family little, as they did not travel to Komsomol often, and when they did, they stayed with one of a small number of close relatives (whose visits to our house were generally welcome). My host parents felt they could not refuse these guests, however, because they feared sending them away would create ugly gossip back in the village and could be awkward for their relatives.

Though not close relatives of Salamat, I learned, the couple who came that afternoon had visited on a number of occasions. Talant had been Salamat's father-in-law's driver (the father-in-law was long deceased). Although Salamat was clearly annoyed to see them, she is a proud woman who tries to uphold Kyrgyz values and was determined to go through the motions of hosting them civilly. She invited the couple in, sat them at the table, and directed us to put water on for tea. After tea, the couple continued to sit, mostly in silence, while we cooked a hot meal. While we worked, Salamat continued to pour tea for them. Although she treated her guests politely, her unhappiness was clear. Normally talkative and cheerful, Salamat sat sullenly, speaking only to offer the customary directives to eat and drink. After they had finished eating, she seemed relieved when they got up to move into the living room to watch TV. We laid out mats and pillows to ensure their comfort, while the younger children, who had been waiting patiently, came to the table to eat.

I felt the guests could not have faulted our hospitality. If not overtly friendly, we had been polite and offered them everything they needed. When Salamat finally went to check on them, however, we heard rising voices. When I peeked into the other room, I saw Talant chasing Salamat around the room, waving a 50 *som* note (about \$2.50 at the time), and trying to force her to take the money. When that failed, he started grabbing at her clothing to force the money into a pocket of her house dress. After several minutes of unsuccessful pursuit, Talant motioned to one of the younger children and handed her the money, which she accepted with delight.

The confrontation was over almost before we realized it had begun, but it was so fraught with hostility that it left me quivering with adrenaline for the rest of the evening. My initial interpretation of the encounter was that the couple realized we considered their visit to be an imposition and offered money as a naïve and miscalculated attempt to assuage their sense of guilt and preserve civility. I understood Salamat's refusal as an attempt to save face. Blatant gestures of reciprocity are offensive in the context of Kyrgyz

hospitality (since they call into question a host's sincerity, something which is hardly the guest's place), and Salamat's refusal was an assertion, on her part, of genuine hospitality.

After I had lived longer among the Kyrgyz, I decided this interpretation was not "thick" enough to explain the heated, almost violent nature of the encounter. The interpretation assumed two parties trying to preserve civility by acting according to their understanding of a shared set of norms and expectations. The hostility evident in the encounter, however, should have made it obvious that civility—much less the relationship that I assumed it to preserve—was not at stake. Furthermore, I later realized that a gesture as clearly inappropriate as offering money could never have been intended as a conciliatory gesture; instead, it was a rebuke. The money was meant to remind Salamat that her family and Talant's were members of a shared moral community, and that begrudging a member of that shared community hospitality was reprehensible, as they were bound by ties of mutual obligation. Talant's gesture emerges as even more inflammatory, considering that a guest is supposed to be docile and obedient. For him to act in this way in Salamat's house implied an inflated sense of the authority his age gave him.

Salamat's refusal asserted her rejection both of Talant's moral authority and the assumption of shared community it seemed to be based upon. To Salamat and her family, leaving the village and establishing their lives in Jalalabat dramatically shifted the networks to which they belonged. In Jalalabat when I lived there, the Kyrgyz I knew figured identity by village origin (most Kyrgyz in the city had immigrated in the past one or two generations), but social networks were configured based on a combination of variables, including occupation, socio-economic status, relative education, piety, and the neighborhood in which one lived. Although Salamat and her family were still "from Komsomol," their networks in Jalalabat were wide and varied, and had become much more valuable to them than their relationships in the distant village. Although they valued their kinship ties there, Salamat and her family had nothing to gain from investing in village social networks. I understood their complaints about village guests as indications that they did not consider themselves part of those networks.

In this encounter, Talant's rebuke not only indexed the different interpretations of relationship held by the two parties, it revealed that Salamat's was more compelling. If Talant and Tursun had accepted their positioning, acknowledged their mistake, and sat out the evening quietly, the illusion of civility and even shared community could have been preserved. Instead, by asserting his authority, Talant exposed the reality that unforgiving global hierarchies now informed the relationship between the two families: he and his wife were poor villagers, undesirable relations for a family of urban

professionals. By asserting authority that held sway in the moral community of his imagination, Talant revealed the emptiness of his authority, built as it was on the fiction of shared community.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT ENCOUNTER

Hospitality can be upended when foreigners who are ignorant of local norms enter local exchanges (Herzfeld 1987). In pre-Soviet times, it was as likely that foreigners who visited Central Asian courts would be captured, put on trial, and executed, as celebrated with lavish hospitality. Local rulers feared no repercussions. Today, the power balance has shifted. Foreigners come as development workers, missionaries, businessmen and women, and tourists. They bring liberal discourses, including democracy and capitalism. They also bring hard currency, which trickles down into local economies, inflating the cost of living in urban areas, and giving rise to a new class of local elites. These foreigners have become the gate-keepers in local economies, controlling access to lucrative professional opportunities and overseeing the distribution of international resources. Contrary to Central Asian ideals of the guest–host relationship according to which guests accept generosity and submit to the will of their hosts, Central Asians find themselves negotiating with powerful foreign guests who do not leave their power at the border, but rather come to give money and impose their will.

Anthropologists have noted that misunderstandings regarding exchange can hinder intimate ties between foreign development workers and members of their target communities. The foreign heads of the Moscow soup kitchen studied by Melissa Caldwell promoted an ethos of pure charity; that is, charity that does not need to be reciprocated. Some recipients, however, made an effort to give the non-Russian volunteers and donors small gifts and services (Caldwell 2004:90). These gestures were not merely gestures of repayment, but expressions of a desire to establish closer relationships. Occasionally, these gestures went too far, creating discomfort on one side or the other. Caldwell (2004:91) tells the story of a recipient who invited foreign volunteers on a guided walking tour of Moscow, ostensibly as a way to thank them for their help. The volunteers refused the invitation, however, fearing that the outing was less an offering of thanks than an opportunity for the guide to ask the volunteers for other forms of help. In this and other cases of failed exchange, refusal created boundaries. Caldwell writes, “By refusing recipients’ efforts to reciprocate, foreign volunteers not only place themselves outside a social network but also establish a powerful hierarchy in which they cast themselves in positions of moral and economic superiority over their Russian beneficiaries” (2004:91–92).



As foreigners penetrate Kyrgyz society they develop intimate relationships with their Kyrgyz hosts, and these relationships nurture new networks of obligation. These international networks differ from indigenous social networks in the types of assumptions members make regarding the extent and significance of exchange. Western foreigners often underestimate the demands Central Asians take to be normal in social relationships. Central Asians, in turn, may be disappointed by their foreign friends' unwillingness to invest heavily in social relationships. Furthermore, they may not anticipate the transient character of these relationships. Most foreigners stay a few months or years and then leave forever, whereas Central Asian networks of exchange can last for several generations. For this reason, Central Asians who invest in relationships with foreigners have to alter their expectations, or end up disappointed.

Misunderstanding, adaptation, and disappointment are evident in the following story. By working for a string of international organizations, Jumabek-baike, a young Kyrgyz man from a poor, mountainous region, had achieved wealth and success, establishing himself as one of the most well-connected Kyrgyz development professionals. When one project finished, he always seemed to have another and more lucrative one lined up. Samuel, an educator from England who worked with Jumabek on some projects, introduced him to—and helped him stay linked in to—the international network from which he continued to prosper. Their instrumental association developed into a close personal relationship. Samuel was much older than Jumabek, but they had daughters who were the same age. Jumabek and his wife and daughter had lived abroad and spoke English. Somewhat isolated by not knowing the language, Samuel and his family found welcome company in Jumabek's family. The relationship between the two families could be understood using the anthropological notion of fictive kinship: Jumabek viewed Samuel not only as a colleague, but also as “baike,” older brother.

These quasi-kinship ties were maintained not only through regular social meetings in the capital city, where Jumabek and Samuel worked, but also through other types of exchange. Periodically, Jumabek and his wife, Dinara-eje, invited Samuel's family to their mountain village, Sary Tala. The visits, which lasted four or five days, were elaborate shows of hospitality, with Jumabek and Dinara's families sponsoring huge feasts, traditional Kyrgyz games, horseback rides, and of course overnights in *jailoo*, the high mountain pastures to which Kyrgyz families take their livestock in the summer, living the traditional, nomadic lifestyle in felt yurts (Kyrgyz, *boz üyi*).

One year, Jumabek invited me along, and I got to meet many of the couple's relatives and was treated to lavish displays of hospitality. On our last

day, before we sat down to the farewell dinner, Samuel pulled me aside and told me he was going to make a speech at the dinner to thank the hosts and present them with a gift of several hundred dollars. Did I want to contribute? The suggestion shocked me. The village was poor and the families had obviously gone to considerable expense to host us. I did not doubt they would be grateful for the money, but I wondered if presenting the money so explicitly and at the moment of our departure was appropriate. I had learned from my years in Kyrgyzstan (reinforced by experiences such as the one I described above) that it is unseemly to offer money in exchange for hospitality. Hospitality is an opportunity to strengthen social ties by reaffirming bonds of obligation; an offer of money both pre-empts the ability of exchange to do this and casts suspicion on the good intentions of the host. I understood the lavish hospitality we had experienced as Jumabek's and Dinara's families' way of acknowledging Samuel's role in bringing prosperity into their lives and ensuring the debt burden remained mutual. It was not clear to me what Samuel's gift would mean or do in this context.

In any case, I could not have contributed money even if I had wanted to. After receiving Jumabek's invitation, I had gone to the bazaar in the nearest big city and bought as much as I could afford of fruit, sweets, and other items I knew were not available in the village. I had spent all my cash on these gifts, which I gave to the hosts upon arrival. In my understanding this was the proper order of hospitality exchange in the Kyrgyz context; when responding to an invitation, one presents an expensive (non-monetary) gift to the host as soon as one arrives, so that the gift cannot be interpreted as a judgment on the hospitality one has experienced, much less a payment for it.

When I told Samuel I did not have any money with me, he replied, "Oh that's all right. You're a student. Everyone knows you don't have a lot of money. I just don't want to get up there and say it's from us, and have you feel left out." I appreciated his effort to include me, although I still worried that the gesture he was planning—connecting money explicitly to the hospitality of the previous few days—was ungracious. His reassurance that Jumabek knew about the gift and approved deflated my self-righteous sense of cultural expertise. Nevertheless, that night at the dinner, I did not have the heart to watch the speech, and found an excuse to be absent when the money was presented.

After some time passed, new incidents involving the two families revealed deeper differences in the way guests and hosts constructed the exchange. Several years after the visit, Dinara-eje and I found ourselves chatting at the home of mutual friends. She confided that Jumabek was having a personal conflict with another colleague in his office, Asylbek, who was from their village and a relative of hers. As the head of a lucrative new project that

would last for several years, Jumabek was hiring staff, and the ambitious Asylbek wanted to be part of the project. This would give Asylbek a higher salary, job security for several years, and experience that might improve his marketability in the international community. Jumabek, however, had balked, unsure if Asylbek was qualified. The conflict was creating friction between Dinara and Jumabek and between the two families. Desperate to convince Jumabek to give Asylbek a chance, but realizing she could not exert any more influence on Jumabek directly without jeopardizing her marriage, Dinara turned to Samuel, who worked for the same organization. She hoped that if Samuel, whom she knew Jumabek looked up to as an elder, counseled Jumabek to hire Asylbek, Jumabek would agree. Her request was not insignificant—she was asking Samuel to interfere in an issue that had little to do with him. She judged the request appropriate, however, considering the close relationship she and Jumabek had with Samuel and his family. To her shock and dismay, Samuel was unwilling to help her. He told her that what Jumabek did was his own business and that he did not want to get involved.

After describing the situation to me, Dinara-eje explained the deeper reason for her dissatisfaction. “Noor, do you remember your visit to Sary Tala? All those activities and parties? Most of them were organized by *my* relatives, not Jumabek’s. Even the jailoo we took you to was *my* family’s jailoo.” These words revealed her assumption of a network of obligation that had been built among the three families (hers, Jumabek’s, and Samuel’s). Since she considered Samuel’s family and her family to be linked in Kyrgyz-style networks of obligation, she viewed her request as not only reasonable but binding. Samuel’s refusal was a blatant dismissal of the relationship between his family and her relatives, a relationship in which her family had invested heavily. Professionally and personally, Samuel considered himself close to Jumabek, not Dinara or either of their sets of relatives. He saw no reason to interfere for her or her family, and in fact wanted to encourage Jumabek to make hiring decisions that were not based on family connections.

Social networks are networks of obligation that allow families to turn to each other in times of need and require them to give to each other in times of unequal fortune. In the Kyrgyz system of hospitality, the debt of being fed by someone, cared for by someone, and taken into someone’s network brings both privilege and responsibility; it is not easily divested. By accepting hospitality, a guest becomes connected to the host in a bond that cannot be repudiated at will, but instead places demands which must be fulfilled even when inconvenient. The passage of time and later exchanges of favors or gifts do not lessen the power or significance of that bond of obligation. Relationships, established through hospitality or other forms of exchange, are

not easily dissolved, but continue to create expectations and promise aid for many years, if not generations, after they are established.

Foreigners in Central Asia are often struck by the exuberance and generosity of hosts, and Central Asians often emphasize this aspect of their culture as particularly distinctive. That these gestures are offered within a context of exchange, with the goal of creating both social cohesion and bonds of mutual obligation, is often left unexpressed and therefore misunderstood. If Samuel assumed that because many years had passed since his visit to Sary Tala that all obligations from that visit had been met, or that the money he gave released him from obligation, he misunderstood Kyrgyz exchange norms. Like many foreigners, however, Samuel lost little in this misunderstanding. Instead, it was the poor village families, whose exacting exchange norms Samuel failed to understand, who ended up surprised by a failed investment.

#### THE MONETIZATION OF HOSPITALITY

Although Dinara-eje's family miscalculated in their investment in a relationship with Samuel, more savvy Central Asians understand the dangers that can arise when establishing relations with individuals from different communities or cultures. Many of them have begun to experiment with new exchange norms when dealing with foreigners. This dynamic is similar to what Melissa Caldwell (2004:130) calls "strategic intimacy," the process of defining community membership based on stereotyped notions of "Self and Other." In Caldwell's telling, foreigners are treated with different norms than community members because foreigners are assumed to be different. For example, foreigners may be required to repay hospitality monetarily, since they are not expected to be familiar with the community's demanding and complex norms.

I witnessed this dynamic while traveling in Uzbekistan with my parents and another couple, Arthur and Melanie. In Bukhara, we hired a guide, Keremet, to show us around for the two or three days of our stay. Keremet was an English teacher by profession but had established an excellent reputation as a guide and was even recommended in a bestselling Central Asian guidebook. She was accustomed to getting a lot of business from foreigners. After our first morning walking together in the old city, we stopped for lunch at a greasy *ashhona* (Uzbek for "café"). We were disappointed that the café had run out of its morning *pilau*, a fried rice dish (also known as *ash* or *plov*). Keremet said, "Don't worry. I am inviting you to have lunch tomorrow at my aunt's." She told us her aunt used to be a chef,

and her pilau was known as the best in town. Although her aunt was almost eighty and retired, she still made her famous pilau.

The next day, Keremet met us at our hotel and walked us to her aunt's house. We were shown into a sitting room in the center of which stood a table beautifully laden with melons, nuts, and breads. Keremet served us tea and urged us to try her aunt's homemade rose petal jam. It was a generous table, but not more lavish than many I had sat at in Central Asia. Knowing we were paying Keremet a generous fee as a guide, I thought this was her way to thank us for the business. Following the rules of Central Asian hospitality, I sat shyly, nibbling pieces of bread and fruit and tasted the jam only after persistent insistence from the host. Finally, Keremet brought in the pilau, and her aunt, a tiny woman with thick glasses, came in to greet us.

The pilau was rich and tasty. I felt myself relax. After several days of being a tourist in Bukhara's old city, weathering the harassment of aggressive sellers for whom foreigners are little more than easy sources of cash, I felt relieved to be back in a more civil Central Asia, in which relationships are about personal interaction, and hospitality is a gentle art of negotiation.

After we finished eating, Arthur leaned over to me and asked me in a whisper if we should offer the women any money. I shook my head vigorously and whispered to him that it would be offensive. Keremet had clearly invited us to be her guests, and we, in turn, had come humbly and behaved humbly, as guests. I feared that offering money would insult her, suggesting that we doubted the sincerity of her generosity. Furthermore, I judged the level of hospitality she had offered to be appropriate considering the business we had brought her. As I had learned from my visit to Sary Tala, Central Asians often make lavish shows of generosity towards people who have brought them work or other opportunities. This is not to say that such gestures are repayment. They should be viewed as a celebration of good fortune, which necessarily includes those who were instrumental in bringing the good fortune, and expresses the desire to maintain and extend relations.

Arthur was not one to be put off, however, and discreetly took Keremet aside and asked her if we could pay her anything for her trouble. Keremet's response was anything but discreet. "Yes, it's five dollars a person," she said so we could all hear. As the others settled our "bill," handing over to Keremet the equivalent of what in Uzbekistan amounted to a healthy month's salary, I sat speechless. We were paying her an hourly rate, even as she was making money from us as patrons of her informal dining establishment. The ridiculousness of being double charged paled, however, next to the sinking feeling of humiliation. In my understanding as someone familiar with Central Asian exchange norms, we had been treated with profound disrespect. We had been invited as guests, we had agreed to come as guests, and we had sat as

guests—not as paying customers. As a guest, one sits meekly, waiting for cues from the host that it is appropriate to begin eating. Both parties take pains to play their respective roles, showing the required amount of respect and trust. This, in turn, establishes a basis for future goodwill and trust. As a customer, in contrast, one is in control. One eats when one wants, what one wants, and how one wants. One makes demands if one is not comfortable. In the hours following the encounter, I reflected with bitterness on my good behavior and fantasized longingly about how much more of the delicious food I would have eaten if I had known we were paying for it.

Keremet had been lucky with us; she reaped the financial reward of those occupying the otherwise low-status position of restaurant owner, while retaining the power and high status of a host. Although her behavior was discomfiting, it is useful to understand it in context. Keremet had had extensive dealings with foreign tourists; she understood the scale of global economic inequalities that separated her and members of her community from these tourists, and she was determined to profit from her contact with them. Her experiences with foreigners had probably strengthened the stereotype of the wealthy foreigner, eager to spend money and unaware of the differences between “guest” and “customer.” The encounter was not about building relationships but about profiting from a business opportunity in the otherwise unforgiving economy of post-independence Uzbekistan.

I suspect Keremet had “invited” many of her clients to dine on her aunt’s pilau, and no one had ever objected. Most likely, they, like Arthur and Melanie, raved about an inexpensive, authentic Uzbek meal. Like Samuel, they felt comfortable divesting themselves of any obligation in the quickest and least ambiguous way: using money. Without blaming Keremet for maximizing her profit, I believe her behavior (like Samuel’s) has unfortunate implications for cross-cultural encounters in Central Asia and for understandings of Central Asian culture beyond the region. Her behavior, although pragmatic in the context of glaring global inequalities, cheapens Central Asian hospitality and pre-empts cross-cultural understanding. By monetizing hospitality, the behavior submits Central Asian hospitality to a global market in which the Central Asian contribution is low in value. Rather than being remembered as a priceless lesson in the richness of Central Asian customs of hospitality, Keremet’s aunt’s pilau is remembered as just another inexpensive, exotic lunch. Rather than establishing a genuine relationship in which all parties learned something about each other and their respective cultures, and might even have a chance to help each other in more lasting ways, Keremet and her “guests” knew each other only in the impersonal roles of the marketplace: as buyer and seller.

The ultimate effect of this monetization of hospitality, then, is that foreign visitors to Central Asia never learn about nor experience the complexity and challenge of local exchange norms, but rather see Central Asia as a place where money rules and anyone can be bought.<sup>9</sup> The blame must be shared, however, among all parties. Many Central Asians (Dinara's family being an exception) have learned that it is more profitable to deal with foreigners on their terms even if on Central Asian soil, rather than try to incorporate them deeply into local networks or exchange practices. Foreigners also act on a profit motive when they prefer to divest themselves monetarily of obligation rather than participate in the demanding exchange networks that sustain Central Asian relationships.

### CONCLUSION

The individuals introduced in these stories do not approach exchange with radically different understandings. As Mauss (1990[1950]) recognized, all humans share an instinctive sense that gifts must be reciprocated and that reciprocity contributes to social solidarity. Instead, the encounters described here index disagreements over relatedness and the moral systems that govern relatedness. In the encounter between Talant and Salamat, Salamat did not question the moral system of exchange according to which even strangers must be helped when in need, but she did question a moral system that asked her to consider Talant and Tursun anything but strangers. By rebuking Salamat, Talant asserted a moral system according to which the families were intimately related, and in which his rights were those not of a guest but a respected elder. He asserted this moral system by virtue of his position as an elder in a shared community. As Judith Beyer (2010) has noted, however, the respect elders enjoy in Kyrgyz society is not inherent to old age, but is acquired when they perform their authority in ways others recognize as exemplary. Salamat's response suggests that Talant's behavior was not an effective performance of authority, making the moral system he imposed suspect. In this encounter, the role of national and global hierarchies should not be discounted. Salamat could judge Talant's authority as suspect and thus question the relatedness asserted by his moral system partly because of the material hierarchies which subordinated Talant and his family to Salamat and hers.

A similar dynamic is evident in the story of Dinara-eje and Samuel. Dinara's family invested in a relationship with Samuel, assuming both parties agreed about the nature of the relationship and the type of exchange it implied. Samuel, however, was operating with very different assumptions. Despite the exchanges of hospitality and other resources between the families, which in

the Kyrgyz context one would expect to imply intimate social ties, the only relationship Samuel viewed to be morally binding was his relationship with Jumabek. For Samuel, morality was less about fulfilling exchange obligations than about exercising discretion in offering his influence. His insistence on reciprocating hospitality with money was his way of establishing limits on his involvement with the village families. This moral vision would be difficult to impose if he were Kyrgyz and could not predict how relations with the other families would change in the course of lifetimes lived in close proximity. Since he was an international worker who was soon to leave the country and whose financial stability depended less on these families than theirs on him, however, he imposed his morality with no fears it could affect him negatively in the future.

With Keremet there is a very different moral geography. Keremet may not have been operating with the intent of subverting global economic inequalities, but most people to whom I relate this story are sympathetic to her because of her position in those hierarchies. What does the symbolic significance of the act matter, they ask, when weighed against the unfairness of global inequalities that leave Uzbeks struggling for their daily bread while American globetrotters see the world? What kind of moral system am I imposing when I suggest that wealthy foreign professionals who can easily pay for such a meal should not have been asked to do so? Nonetheless, I question if the transaction actually does benefit the Central Asian community. By asserting free market morality, it encourages the further reach of a system that threatens the survival of many Central Asian populations. Local gift exchange customs and the moralities that inform them have made it easier for many Central Asians to cope with the traumatic dislocations of independence. In the tourist corridors, however, where individuals such as Keremet and foreign tourists meet, these moralities are being replaced by the more unforgiving moral system of the market place, from which only a few profit. In this new calculus, the have-nots still lose, even if individuals such as Keremet profit briefly.

My argument is not that any of these moral systems is better than the others—the tendency for the moral system of Kyrgyz exchange to lead to nepotism is painfully obvious to development professionals like Samuel, just as Samuel's moral system threatens the vibrancy of social capital and the moral system of the free market exacerbates inequality. The issue that connects these stories is the way positioning within global hierarchies determines the outcomes when these moral systems come into conflict. If most anthropologists study exchange to learn about how individuals establish, maintain, or reaffirm a sense of shared community, anthropologists working in multi-sited field sites or among diverse populations can take advantage of



failed exchanges to understand the impact of global trends on the way people construct and understand community as well as the impact of global inequalities on local culture.

## NOTES

1. Robert M. Hayden (2002), writing about shared religious sites, notes that dynamics interpreted as cooperative syncretism are often more agonistic in nature; what looks like competing groups accepting each other's difference may actually be competing groups grudgingly refraining from interfering with each other. In other words, what looks like a blurred, hybrid identity may be something more contentious.
2. Dastorkon is a cloth or plastic covering, spread on the ground, floor, or table, upon which food is set.
3. All figures taken from the CIA World Factbook, accessed 2010. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html>.
4. The encounters described here involve Kyrgyz, Uzbek, American, and European individuals. My depictions of Central Asian hospitality, however, are based on interactions with members of many ethnic groups.
5. I have changed the names of people and places and some details in the stories to preserve anonymity.
6. Baike is an honorific in Kyrgyz that is appended to the first names of men who are older than the speaker. It means, literally, "older brother."
7. Eje is an honorific in Kyrgyz that is appended to the first names of women who are older than the speaker. It means, literally, "older sister."
8. I use Peace Corps vocabulary here, which reflects the organization's efforts to create a relation of fictive kinship between volunteers and their hosts.
9. The impact of these types of misunderstandings on development efforts, especially due to ignorance of the way local exchange networks operate, are discussed in Borbieva (2007).

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