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МАҚОЛАДА КЕЛТИРИЛГАН ДАЛИЛЛАРНИНГ ТЎҒРИЛИГИ УЧУН МУАЛЛИФ МАСЪУЛДИР | АВТОР НЕСЕТ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ ЗА ДОСТОВЕРНОСТЬ ФАКТОВ ИЗЛОЖЕННЫХ В СТАТЬЕ

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ИЖТИМОЙ ТАДҚИҚОТЛАР ЖУРНАЛИ

ЖУРНАЛ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ | JOURNAL OF SOCIAL STUDIES

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TRIBAL STRUCTURES AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF KAZAKH, KARAKALPAK, KYRGYZ, TAJIK AND UZBEK CONTEXTS<http://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.00000000>**ABSTRACT**

This article offers a comparative sociological analysis of tribal and kinship structures in Kazakhstan, Karakalpakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Drawing on structural functionalism, collective memory theory, social network analysis and digital sociology, it examines how kinship-based identities persist and change under post-Soviet state-building, urbanisation and digital mediation. Three trajectories are identified: institutional resilience (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), adaptive intermediacy (Karakalpakstan, Tajikistan) and structural transformation (Uzbekistan). The concept of “layered identity” is proposed to explain how tribal affiliation coexists with civic and digital belonging. Contrary to modernisation predictions, tribal structures have not disappeared but have become flexible social resources.

Key words: tribal structures; kinship networks; clan; Central Asia; Karakalpakstan; mahalla; collective memory; social capital; digital identity; layered identity; post-Soviet transformation; platformisation.

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MARKAZIY OSIYODA URUG‘-QABILAVIY TUZILMALAR VA IJTIMOY TRANSFORMATSIYA: QOZOQ, QORAQALPOQ, QIRG‘IZ, TOJIK VA O‘ZBEK KONTEKSTLARINING QIYOSIY TAHLILI**ANNOTATSIYA**

Maqolada Qozog‘iston, Qoraqalpog‘iston, Qirg‘iziston, Tojikiston va O‘zbekistondagi urug‘-qabilaviy va qarindoshlik tuzilmalarining qiyosiy sotsiologik tahlili beriladi. Strukturaviy funksionalizm, jamoaviy xotira nazariyasi, ijtimoiy tarmoqlar tahlili va raqamli sotsiologiya yondashuvlari asosida qarindoshlikka asoslangan identikliklar postsovet davlat qurilishi, urbanizatsiya va raqamlashtirish sharoitida qanday saqlanib qolayotgani va o‘zgarayotgani

o'rganiladi. Uchta traektoriya aniqlandi: institutsional barqarorlik (Qozog'iston, Qirg'iziston), moslashuvchan oraliq holat (Qoraqalpog'iston, Tojikiston) va strukturaviy transformatsiya (O'zbekiston). Urug'-qabilaviy mansublikning fuqarolik va raqamli mansublik bilan yonma-yon mavjudligini tushuntirish uchun «qatlamli identiklik» tushunchasi taklif etiladi. Modernizatsiya nazariyasi bashoratlaridan farqli ravishda, urug'-qabilaviy tuzilmalar yo'qolmadi, balki moslashuvchan ijtimoiy resursga aylandi.

Kalit so'zlar: urug'-qabilaviy tuzilmalar; qarindoshlik tarmoqlari; Markaziy Osiyo; Qoraqalpog'iston; mahalla; jamoaviy xotira; ijtimoiy kapital; raqamli identiklik; qatlamli identiklik; postsovet transformatsiyasi.

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РОДОПЛЕМЕННЫЕ СТРУКТУРЫ И СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ КАЗАХСКОГО, КАРАКАЛПАКСКОГО, КЫРГЫЗСКОГО, ТАДЖИКСКОГО И УЗБЕКСКОГО КОНТЕКСТОВ

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье представлен сравнительный социологический анализ родоплеменных и родственных структур в Казахстане, Каракалпакстане, Кыргызстане, Таджикистане и Узбекистане. На основе структурного функционализма, теории коллективной памяти, сетевого анализа и цифровой социологии рассматривается, как идентичности, основанные на родстве, сохраняются и изменяются в условиях постсоветского государственного строительства, урбанизации и цифровизации. Выделены три траектории: институциональная устойчивость (Казахстан, Кыргызстан), адаптивная промежуточность (Каракалпакстан, Таджикистан) и структурная трансформация (Узбекистан). Предложено понятие «многослойной идентичности», объясняющее сосуществование родоплеменной принадлежности с гражданской и цифровой. Вопреки прогнозам теории модернизации, родоплеменные структуры не исчезли, а превратились в гибкий социальный ресурс.

Ключевые слова: родоплеменные структуры; родственные сети; клан; Центральная Азия; Каракалпакстан; махалля; коллективная память; социальный капитал; цифровая идентичность; многослойная идентичность; постсоветская трансформация; платформизация.

INTRODUCTION

The persistence of tribal and clan-based structures in post-Soviet Central Asia remains one of the most consequential puzzles of comparative sociology. Classical modernisation theory, in both its Parsonian and Soviet versions, predicted that kinship-based social organisation would dissolve under the pressure of industrialisation, urbanisation and state-building [1]. Soviet policy – from sedentarisation and collectivisation to campaigns against “survivals of the past” – was explicitly designed to accelerate this process. The record of the independence period, however, tells a substantially different story.

Across the region, kinship and tribal networks have demonstrated remarkable adaptive capacity. In Kazakhstan, the zhuz system and its constituent tribes continue to inform informal alliances and elite recruitment [2; 3]. In Kyrgyzstan, kinship and regional networks were visible in the mass mobilisations of 2005, 2010 and 2020 [4; 5]. In Tajikistan, regional solidarity networks proved decisive in the civil war and the post-war settlement [6; 7]. In Karakalpakstan, belonging to an uruw (tribe) remains a resilient cultural marker with deep historical roots [8], while in Uzbekistan

state-sponsored civic nationalism and the mahalla have reconfigured, but not dissolved, kinship-based solidarities [9; 10].

The existing literature, though rich, remains fragmented along disciplinary and national lines. Most studies address a single country; systematic comparison is rare; Karakalpakstan is seldom treated as a case in its own right; and the digital mediation of kinship has received little systematic attention. This article addresses these gaps through three contributions: a unified comparative analytical framework; a threefold typology – institutional resilience, adaptive intermediacy and structural transformation; and the concept of “layered identity”, which theorises how individuals simultaneously inhabit tribal, civic and digital forms of belonging. The central research question is: how do tribal and kinship structures transform across different Central Asian contexts, and what role do digital environments play in mediating this transformation?

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative comparative design combining a systematic review of the literature, comparative-historical analysis and structured, focused case comparison. Case selection follows a “most different systems” logic [11; 12]: the five cases share the general parameters of post-Soviet Central Asian development while varying on the dimensions that matter for the argument – the degree of institutionalisation of tribal structures, pastoral or sedentary heritage, state capacity and level of urbanisation. Karakalpakstan, although part of Uzbekistan, is treated as a separate case because of its distinct genealogical system and its status as a sovereign republic within Uzbekistan.

The evidence base comprises peer-reviewed articles and scholarly monographs identified through Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar for the period 2000–2025 (search terms: “tribe”, “clan”, “kinship”, “genealogy”, “mahalla”, combined with country names and “Central Asia”), complemented by classic Soviet ethnographic studies that provide a historical baseline [8]. Grey literature is used for illustration only. The analysis proceeds in three stages: within-case reconstruction of institutional features and trajectories; cross-case comparison through the proposed typology; and interpretive integration with the theoretical debates. The study relies on secondary sources and does not introduce new quantitative indicators; coverage is uneven (Karakalpakstan and Tajikistan are less documented), and the typology is therefore offered as a heuristic to be tested with primary field data.

MAIN PART

Theoretical framework

Structural-functionalist approaches analyse institutions in terms of the functions they perform for the wider social system [1]. Soviet institutions were designed precisely to displace the functions of kinship: the collective farm replaced pastoral resource management, the party hierarchy replaced lineage leadership, and school education replaced the transmission of genealogical knowledge. That tribal structures nevertheless endured calls for a model of incremental institutional change in which institutions adapt through layering, conversion and displacement rather than sudden replacement [13]. On this reading, the Soviet period suppressed rather than eliminated kinship functions, and post-Soviet conditions opened space for their reassertion. Ethnographic research confirms that kinship is not a relic but an actively reproduced resource, mobilised in contexts ranging from marriage to elite competition [2; 14].

A second strand draws on the sociology of memory. M. Halbwachs showed that memory is constituted through group interaction [15]; J. Assmann distinguished communicative memory, transmitted informally across three or four generations, from cultural memory, institutionalised and oriented towards a remote past [16]. Tribal identity in Central Asia operates in both registers: communicatively, through family narratives and the norm of knowing one’s “seven ancestors” (jetti ata); culturally, through epics, written genealogies (shejire, sanjyra) and sacred sites. The authority to narrate the past, including genealogies, is contested and politically consequential [17; 18].

Third, social network theory clarifies the dual role of kinship. Strong ties within lineages provide mutual aid, social insurance and political solidarity, while weak ties between groups widen opportunity structures [19]. In R. Putnam’s terms, kinship generates abundant bonding capital but may restrict bridging capital [20]. Studies of Central Asian politics show how patron–client and kin-

based ties are mobilised by elites [5; 3], while also warning against conflating elite “clan” politics with everyday kinship practice and regional solidarity [21; 22].

Fourth, digital sociology adds the concept of platformisation – the penetration of platform logics of datafication, selection and connection into previously non-commercial spheres of life [23]. Under “deep mediatisation” social reality is itself constructed through media [24], and algorithmic curation shapes which identities become visible [25]. Applied to kinship, this means that genealogical knowledge and ritual passing through digital platforms are simplified, accelerated and recombined. Together, the four perspectives provide a multidimensional framework for capturing both persistence and transformation.

Historical trajectories

In the pre-colonial period, tribal organisation performed constitutive functions. Among pastoral and semi-pastoral peoples – Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Karakalpaks – the tribe was the primary unit of political authority, resource management and collective defence; customary law (adat) was administered by councils of elders, and exogamy was regulated by genealogical boundaries. T.A. Zhdanko’s classic study reconstructed the Karakalpak system of two major divisions (arys), Qońırat and On tórt urıw, each subdivided into tribes (uruw) and smaller lineages, and documented its link to settlement patterns along the Amu Darya delta [8]. Among the sedentary Uzbek and Tajik populations, kinship was more territorially rooted, organised around the mahalla and extended families, although lineage consciousness persisted among groups of nomadic origin [10].

Russian imperial administration created volosts and aul communities that partly mapped onto tribal boundaries, turning tribal elites into intermediaries between the state and the population. Soviet nationality policy went further: the national-territorial delimitation of 1924–1936 created republics with fixed borders and codified national identities, relying heavily on ethnographic classification [26; 27]. Collectivisation destroyed the pastoral economy that had sustained nomadic tribal organisation. Yet the Soviet period did not create a tabula rasa: O. Roy argues that collective farms and local administrations paradoxically “froze” local solidarities in institutional form [28], and S.N. Abashin shows how national identities were assembled from heterogeneous local and genealogical categories [29]. Independence created a new opportunity structure: new states needed legitimacy, economic liberalisation intensified competition for resources, and the erosion of Soviet social infrastructure increased reliance on kin-based mutual aid.

COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

Kazakhstan: institutional resilience. The division of Kazakhs into three zhuzes – Senior, Middle and Junior – subdivided into tribes (ru) and lineages has retained sociological relevance despite seven decades of Soviet suppression. E. Schatz demonstrated that clan knowledge in independent Kazakhstan is simultaneously concealed in public discourse and actively used in elite networks, patronage and marriage strategies [2]. K. Collins showed how informal clan pacts shaped regime transition and access to resources in the 1990s [3]. The state has both exploited and contained tribal legitimacy, balancing zhuz representation in appointments while promoting a civic Kazakhstani identity that formally subordinates tribal to national belonging [30]. Urbanisation has not dissolved genealogical knowledge: shejire are published, discussed and digitised, and genealogical websites and messenger groups allow urban and diaspora Kazakhs to reconstruct family trees collectively.

Kyrgyzstan: tribal mobilisation and political instability. Kyrgyzstan illustrates the direct politicisation of kinship and regional networks. Three presidents were removed from office through mass protest – in 2005, 2010 and 2020. A. Temirkulov shows that mobilisation in 2005 and 2010 relied on local, kinship and patronage networks rather than on parties [4]; S. Radnitz describes this as elite-led mobilisation of dependent communities [5]. The north–south cleavage overlaps with genealogical idioms but is primarily regional. D. Gullette demonstrates that the very notion of “tribalism” is a product of the interplay between genealogical knowledge (sanjyra) and state discourse [14], while A. Ismailbekova shows how patronage is articulated in the idiom of kinship and the “native son” [31]. Customary institutions such as courts of elders (aksakal courts) continue to regulate everyday life [32], and kin-mediated practices such as ala kachuu reveal the gendered dimension of kinship norms [33].

Tajikistan: regional networks and post-conflict consolidation. The civil war of 1992–1997 made the role of regional solidarity networks starkly visible: the conflict was largely structured along regional lines – Leninabad (Khujand), Kulob, Gharm and Pamir [6]. The General Agreement of 1997 institutionalised an inter-regional bargain, after which power was progressively concentrated in networks associated with Kulob [7]. I. Tunçer-Kılavuz cautions that these networks are better described as regional and patronage-based than as “clans” in the genealogical sense [22]. At the mass level, the extended patrilineal family (avlod) and the mahalla remain central to resource access, dispute resolution and social insurance, and large-scale labour migration to Russia has extended these networks transnationally.

Karakalpakstan: adaptive intermediacy. Karakalpakstan occupies an intermediate position in the typology. As a republic within Uzbekistan, it is subject to the same state-building pressures as the rest of the country, yet it retains a distinct ethnic and genealogical identity. The arys–uruw system described by T.A. Zhdanko [8] has lost most of its role in resource allocation and political competition, but continues to matter as a marker of origin, in marriage preferences and exogamy rules, in commemorative rituals (as) and in the organisation of family cemeteries. In urban areas the mahalla, transplanted from Uzbek administrative practice, partly mediates kinship functions, producing a hybrid form in which a formally civic structure is filled with kin-based content. The events of July 2022 in Nukus, triggered by proposed constitutional amendments concerning the republic’s status, demonstrated the continued salience of a distinct Karakalpak collective identity; whether tribal subdivisions played any organisational role remains an open empirical question that requires field research.

Uzbekistan: structural transformation. Uzbekistan represents the strongest case of structural transformation. Uzbek identity was consolidated in the Soviet period from heterogeneous sedentary and semi-nomadic groups [29; 10], and post-independence nation-building promoted a civic and historical national identity over sub-national tribal or regional ones. The mahalla has been institutionalised as the main sub-state unit of social regulation, combining local self-government, social monitoring, welfare distribution and ceremonial organisation; R. Urinboyev shows that it operates through a blend of social norms, informal networks and administrative functions [9]. Since 2017 the mahalla system has been further expanded as an instrument of “New Uzbekistan” governance, including registers of vulnerable households and targeted social assistance. Tribal identity has not disappeared – it persists in family narratives, regional-origin consciousness and some marriage preferences, notably among groups of Dasht-i Qipchaq origin [10] – but it functions at a latent, symbolic level rather than as an organising principle of mobilisation. The functions of kinship have been substantially absorbed by state and quasi-state structures, while the cultural memory of tribal belonging endures.

Digital transformation and layered identity.

Since the 2010s the spread of smartphones and platforms such as Telegram, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok has added a new dimension to the dynamics of tribal identity. The concept of “layered identity” proposed here captures how individuals simultaneously inhabit and negotiate tribal, national, regional, professional and digital registers of belonging without necessary contradiction between them. Layering is not a transitional stage on the way to a unified modern identity but a durable structural feature of contemporary Central Asian social life. The concept resonates with R. Brubaker’s critique of “groupism” [34] and A. Sen’s argument for the plurality of identity [35].

Three mechanisms of digital layering can be distinguished. First, the platformisation of genealogy: online family trees, genealogy websites and messenger groups for specific lineages remain continuous with the shejire tradition – they validate the authority of genealogical knowledge – while transforming it by widening participation and enabling diaspora engagement [23]. Second, algorithmic amplification: engagement-optimised recommendation systems may intensify identification among users already interested in tribal content while leaving others unaffected [25]; short-video formats encourage the “micro-performance” of identity through dress, music and ritual fragments. Third, state regulation: governments differ in how far they tolerate, channel or restrict

online expressions of sub-national identity, which shapes how visible tribal discourse becomes in each country.

Two dimensions require particular attention. Generationally, younger cohorts may report weaker tribal identification in conventional terms while participating in digital genealogical communities – a pattern consistent with the layered identity hypothesis that needs testing with survey data. In terms of gender, women often perform the practical labour of kin-keeping – maintaining ties, organising rituals, transmitting family history – while formal authority in kinship hierarchies remains male [33; 36]. Whether digital participation expands women's agency within kinship networks or merely extends this gendered labour online is an important question for future research.

DISCUSSION

The comparison yields four theoretical implications. First, the convergence thesis of classical modernisation theory is not supported: tribal structures have followed divergent paths shaped by historical trajectories, institutional configurations and state strategies, which supports neo-institutionalist arguments about path dependence [13] and extends them to informal institutions and identity practices. Second, the threefold typology captures an intermediate reality – characteristic of Karakalpakstan and Tajikistan – in which the functional role of tribal structures declines while their symbolic significance endures; the distinction between functional and symbolic dimensions of kinship is analytically crucial. Third, layered identity offers a non-substitutive, non-hierarchical model of identity plurality grounded in regional evidence. Fourth, the Central Asian material shows that the platformisation framework, developed mainly on Western cases, must be contextualised where platforms interact with genealogical traditions that have no direct Western equivalent. Finally, neither Kazakhstan's incorporation of tribal symbolism nor Uzbekistan's substitution of civic for tribal identity has fully achieved its aims, suggesting that the management of sub-national identity remains an inherently contested political project.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that tribal and kinship structures in Central Asia have not dissolved under Soviet and post-Soviet modernisation but have followed three distinct trajectories: institutional resilience, in which tribal networks retain significant social and political functions (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan); adaptive intermediacy, in which they keep cultural and symbolic significance while losing primary functional roles (Karakalpakstan, Tajikistan); and structural transformation, in which the mahalla and civic institutions have absorbed kinship functions while tribal memory persists at a latent level (Uzbekistan). The concept of layered identity explains how these affiliations coexist with civic and digital belonging: the salience of each layer is determined by context and increasingly mediated by platforms.

On this basis the following recommendations are proposed:

- ✓ for researchers – to test the typology with primary data, combining surveys with ethnographic fieldwork, focus groups and key informant interviews, above all in Karakalpakstan and Tajikistan, where secondary evidence is weakest;
- ✓ to develop methods for the systematic analysis of digital genealogical communities and to collect longitudinal data capable of capturing generational change in tribal identification;
- ✓ to give explicit attention to the gender dimension of kinship transmission and to the role of women as kin-keepers, both offline and online;
- ✓ for public administration – to take into account that mahalla-based social programmes in Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan operate within dense kinship networks that can either strengthen or distort targeting, and to build transparent criteria and feedback mechanisms into these programmes;
- ✓ for development and investment projects – to integrate kinship and lineage structures into social assessments, stakeholder engagement and grievance redress mechanisms, since these networks shape how communities receive information, voice concerns and distribute benefits.

Central Asian tribal structures, far from being remnants of a superseded past, are dynamic social formations that continue to shape – and to be shaped by – the political, economic and technological transformations of the twenty-first century.

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