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## Chapter 16

# Corruption in a Culture of Money: Understanding Social Norms in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan

Rustamjon Urinboyev and Måns Svensson

### Introduction

There was a widespread euphoria in the 1990s, in Uzbekistan and the outside world, that the introduction of Western-style political institutions and legal system would promote democratic governance in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. However, many commentators now argue that Uzbekistan has made little progress in promoting the rule of law and good governance, and that many formal institutions of government have achieved merely a showcase quality. One of the main problems in this regard is corruption. According to the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index, released annually by Transparency International, Uzbekistan is among the 10 most corrupt countries in the world (TI, 2011). Also, the control of corruption indicator of the World Bank Governance Studies shows an extremely high level of corruption in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries (Libman, 2008).

Understandably, post-Soviet Uzbekistan has been the subject of a great surge in academic research and writing on corruption. Much of the literature tends to concentrate on macro-level topics and state-centred approaches, focusing on kleptocratic elites in the upper echelons of the state organisation, malfunctioning public administration structures, administratively commanded economic policies, inefficient post-Soviet agricultural reforms, corrupt law-enforcement agencies, and inadequate ways of dealing with corruption on the part of state authorities (Ergashev et al., 2006; Wegerich, 2006; Trevisani, 2007; Markowitz, 2008; Kandiyoti, 2007; Luong, 2004). The bulk of these authors argue that the struggles among these various state actors to gain control over scarce resources have resulted in contradictory state policies, thereby making corruption and bribery a survival strategy among ordinary citizens (including low-level officials, such as police officers). At the same time, these studies also claim that corruption and bribery may be practised by state elites themselves for more predatory reasons, which have nothing to do with survival strategies. Another portrait gleaned from scholarly works suggests that it is the penetration of clans and regional patronage networks into official structures that deplete the state's organisational powers and cause corruption and inefficiencies in the public administration system (Kubicek,

1998; Pashkun, 2003; Ilkhamov, 2007; Collins, 2006; Luong, 2002). There is also a tendency to explain the ubiquity of corruption in Uzbekistan as an outcome of its communist past (Gleason, 1995; Staples, 1993; Ergashev et al., 2006).

The conclusion of previous research seems clear: Uzbekistan is regarded by Western academics and policy makers as an authoritarian state with a strong central government that is capable of penetrating deeply into the fabric of society and controlling and moulding even the intimate aspects of social life. However, the strong focus on the state and its policies has a tendency to aggrandise the role of the state into being the prime mover of widespread corruption, as if it alone shapes the basic patterns of economic life and determines the parameters of daily social relations. With few exceptions (Abramson, 2000; Rasanayagam, 2011), scholarly literature has paid little heed to the local perceptions of moral codes and values of informal transactions in Uzbekistan, where the nitty-gritty of social relations are established and maintained through informal exchange and reciprocation of money, material goods and services.

In this study, we accept and use the working definition of 'corruption' presented by Transparency International: 'corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain' (hereinafter we refer to this basic understanding of corruption as a pure Western perspective). However, when applying this concept we emphasize the need to take into consideration the critique by scholars such as Tanzi (1998: 8–10), who notes that the meaning of the word 'abuse' varies according to local legal and cultural standards (see also Werner, 2000; Gupta, 1995; Polese, 2008; Humphrey, 2002). It is also necessary to acknowledge the fact that corruption has different meanings and logic among different levels of society; and that there is a difference between large numbers of low-level officials, on the one hand, and the smaller group of state elites, on the other. It is not that corruption at higher levels of governance merely mirrors understandings of reciprocity and exchange at the grass-roots of society. However, state officials on lower levels are as dependent on informal coping strategies in order to survive as the ordinary citizens. Kandiyoti (1998 and 2007) has demonstrated that both ordinary citizens and public officials in Uzbekistan are becoming heavily reliant on informal coping strategies, due to economic stagnation and shrinkage of the welfare state in the post-Soviet period. From this perspective, there is a connection between informal transactions of everyday life and the corruption of the state.

### **Research aim**

In this study, we focus on socio-economic structures, such as networks of reciprocity and exchange in Uzbekistan, and use ethnographic data on wedding ceremonies to show the local moral codes and values of informal transactions and how these could undermine a pure Western perspective on corruption. A theoretically founded hypothesis is that informal transactions in Uzbek society are surrounded by a different cultural meaning than in most of the Western world. If

this is true, there may be reasons to re-evaluate the concept of corruption in order to reflect the morality of exchange in Uzbekistan. The intention is not to establish a causal relationship between informal transactions in weddings and corruption within the public organizations. Instead, by using ethnographic methods we aim to explore the social meaning and ordinary activities surrounding informal transactions, in order to better understand the social context forming the premises and informing the meaning of transactions in Uzbekistan. The bulk of informal transactions in everyday life are simply manifestations of deeply embedded social norms and customs in Uzbekistan. It could be described as a culture of money, characterised by networks of reciprocity and exchange.

### **Previous research**

Corruption was studied before the fall of the Soviet Union (Zemtsov, 1991; Staples, 1993; Critchlow, 1988; Srubar, 1991; Simis, 1978), but much of that literature was entirely state-centred. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a shift in perspectives. There is an extensive literature on corruption in post-Soviet states that focuses on the problems of using a pure Western perspective (Werner, 2000, Humphrey, 2002, Polese, 2008, Patico, 2003; Ledeneva, 1998; Wanner, 2005; Rasanayagam, 2011; Sneath, 2006; Abramson, 2000). This literature is based upon a theoretical understanding of money, gifts and the morality of exchange (Mauss, 1990; Parry and Bloch, 1989) and empirical studies concerned with different kind of transactions between citizens and state officials. At first glance, many of these transactions may come across as bribes; however, the research shows that, taking the cultural context into consideration, these transactions may very well be considered to be morally acceptable gifts. For example, Abel Polese (2008) empirically studied the context and morality of transactions between citizens and university teachers, doctors and road traffic officers in Ukraine, and concluded that corruption needs to be redefined, at least when dealing with cases in which the alleged corrupt transactions help people to survive. Caroline Humphrey (2002) describes the multi-faceted morality of different illegal transactions when giving numerous examples of custom and police officers involved in dubious transactions. It leads her to argue towards rethinking bribery in some spheres in Russia. The similarities between Russian and other post-socialist societies make it possible to generalize Humphrey's results from one country to the other. Cynthia Werner's (1997 and 2000) anthropological work on understanding and problematizing the blurred boundary between gifts and bribes in Kazakhstan has been influential in this field. Her work points to the necessity of considering whether the anti-corruption legislation promoted by powerful global organizations is appropriate for a local setting where gift exchange is an integral part of the culture. Johan Rasanayagam (2011), through an empirical case study of a local teacher, shows how this line of argumentation is also true for Uzbekistan. He even claims that the informal economy is so influential that, in a sense, it is all that there is.

In our study, we depart from the scholarly context described above. However, we are not focusing on the exchange between citizens and official representatives, but rather on the exchanges between ordinary citizens in general in their everyday life. The reason for this focus is that we want to get a deeper understanding of the social structures that underlie the blurred boundary between gifts and bribes.

There is another scientific field of importance to our study that has to do with the specific choice of weddings as the social arena that we focus on in our empirical studies. Weddings are considered to be extremely geared towards money and gift exchange, and therefore of great interest when understanding different aspects of socio-economic structures (Agadjanian and Makarova, 2003; White, 1994; Kandiyoti and Azimova, 2004; Kandiyoti, 1998; Peters, 1990; Bates, 1974; Mundy, 1995; Yalçın-Heckmann, 2001; Annaklychev, 1984; Borozna, 1984). We will elaborate on this literature in the analysis section.

### **Theoretical framework – contextualising informal transactions**

Although scholars studying the developing world have significantly moved away from extreme state-centred theories (Boone, 1994; Kohli, 1994; Migdal, 1994 and 1988; Shue, 1994; van Klinken and Barker, 2009), the state-centred (macro) perspective still seems to pervade academic and policy debates in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia. Much of this literature argues that the state consists of multiple actors operating at the central, regional, local, and rural or village level, and that the struggles among those actors are likely to be more crucial in determining the shape and outcomes of state policies than the struggles between the state and social forces (Ilkhamov, 2004; Adams, 2004; Kamp, 2004; McMann, 2004; Ergashev et al., 2006; Trevisani, 2007; Markowitz, 2008; Luong, 2004). However, as we will demonstrate later, there might be reasons to focus on the micro-level when studying corruption in the context of Uzbekistan, where society is mostly based on informal economy and kinship networks, and the state fails to secure the basic needs of their citizens. Therefore, in this study, to put informal transactions in a socio-legal context, we draw on Joel S. Migdal's (1994, 2001 and 1988; Migdal et al., 1994) the state-in-society approach and the concept of norms. The norm concept utilized in this chapter is consistent with the definition used by Måns Svensson (in Chapter 3 of this volume). Accordingly, norms are (a) normative statements that (b) are socially reproduced and (c) represent the individual's perception of the expectations surrounding their behaviour. Ultimately, these norm attributes form the definition of all norms (formal and informal) constituting the culture of money.

A central idea of the state-in-society approach is that the state and society are not separate entities; rather, they are intertwined entities that engage in mutually transforming interactions. According to Migdal, Kohli and Shue (1994: 2), 'states are parts of societies. States may help mould, but they are also continually moulded by, the societies within which they are embedded. Societies affect states

as much as, or possibly more than, states affect societies'. From this perspective, the state is just a sprawling organisation within society, and not very different from other informal or formal social organisations (such as family, clans and tribes), and coexists symbiotically with those other social organisations. States face enormous resistance from social forces in implementing their policies, since their laws and regulations must compete with the norms of other social structures that promote different versions of how people should behave. When Migdal talks about social forces, he includes both the structural dimension (for instance, clan or mosque) and the meaning (normative elements) that those structures provide to individuals. Therefore, he sees structures beneath the social forces, such as social norms and traditions, as part of the state-in-society.

There is strong support for Migdal's perspective in the field of law and economics, where Robert C. Ellickson was one of the first scholars to fully recognise the importance of socially enforced norms. Ellickson (1998: 540) states that 'much of the glue of a society comes not from law enforcement, as the classicists would have it, but rather from the informal enforcement of social mores by acquaintances, bystanders, trading partners, and others'; and he continues 'informal systems of external social control are far more important than law in many contexts, especially ones where interacting parties have a continuing relationship and little at stake' (ibid.). Social norms guide people's actions and social interaction to a greater degree than law does (Drobak, 2006). In organization theory and economics, in particular, it has been possible to demonstrate the importance of the informal norms in human behaviour. Also, Anthony Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, and his descriptions of the relationship between micro- and macro-levels, are comparable to the ideas of Migdal and Ellickson. As Giddens claims, the micro- and macro-levels should not be treated as fundamentally parted from each other – in fact, they are interconnected and moulding one another. One of the main propositions of structuration theory is that the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction (the duality of structure) (Giddens, 1984: 19).

Armed with the state-in-society approach and the concept of norms, it could be inferred that public administration practices are not fundamentally separated from the norms of other informal structures of society. It is important to emphasise, however, that we do not attempt to show any causal relation between micro and macro structures. Rather, we want to show the importance of taking the micro-level into consideration when trying to understand corruption in non-Western societies like Uzbekistan, where society is mostly based on informal economy and kinship networks. Furthermore, we aim to enhance the understanding of such structures in Uzbekistan through our empirical example of weddings. When doing this, it is of great importance to remember the distinction between low-level officials and more predatory state elites. The arguments presented as a result of this research have stronger relevance when talking about the state-in-society than when analysing state elites. It could be stated that there is a need to distinguish between functional redistributive informal transactions and more predatory transactions where

resources go from weak to strong. This is, of course, true; but, in our case it is more important to show how there are informal standards in everyday life regulating transactions of resources between citizens. If this can be shown, it is a strong indicator that there are similar informal standards regulating transactions between citizens and low-level officials that will be regarded as bribery or corruption by a pure Western perspective. These transactions are, however, accepted within society and culture as legitimate coping strategies – regardless of whether they are functional or not. It is therefore more a question of a culture of money than of corruption.

### Methodology

This study is based on two periods of field research in the Oltiariq district of the Fergana region, Uzbekistan. The first field research was conducted during April–May 2009, and the second lasted for three months, during June–August 2010. The fieldsite was chosen based on contacts and available social networks. The methods employed for data collection were participant observation, informal interviews and semi-structured interview. The first author, being native Uzbek, had the advantage of knowing the language, and possessed the pre-understanding of local conditions and situation, whereas the second author, from Sweden (non-native), added to the study an external perspective. Both authors went to Uzbekistan for the first period in 2009 and stayed in the fieldsite together. The first author was alone during the second field study in 2010.

We used ethnographic methods and the case of wedding ceremonies in order to illustrate social meaning and ordinary activities surrounding informal transactions on a micro-level in Uzbekistan. During the first period, we both observed three wedding ceremonies that were hosted and attended by different social groups, ranging from local elites to ordinary farm workers. The first author observed the next three weddings during the second field period. Our observations frequently took the shape of opportunistic chats, questions that arose on the spur of the moment. The weddings took place in Oltiariq district in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan, during April 2009–August 2010. The choice of using wedding ceremonies for collecting empirical data is based on three main arguments. First, the wedding ceremonies embody authentic features of Uzbek culture: traditions, values, collectivism, age and gender hierarchies, social networks and kinship relations, central role of *mahalla* (a residential neighbourhood institution), and power and status-based relations. After independence, weddings became central occasions where the return to authentic Uzbek forms was clearly in evidence (Kandiyoti and Azimova, 2004). Second, the arrangement of a marriage in Uzbekistan is both a lengthy and a costly process, involving a complex traditional exchange of gifts and money between the in-laws. Money and gifts have a conspicuous presence during both marriage negotiations and the wedding ceremony. Hence, weddings display multivocality in the meaning of money and gift exchanges, and thereby exhibit



a culture of money. Third, the wedding ceremony is the concern of the whole community, as it is arranged with the support of and resources from local society, and thereby reflects the status and social position of the families that are to be united. In this regard, the wedding institution involves both formal and informal aspects of the local community when gathering the necessary resources.

Apart from observing weddings, during the second period of fieldwork in 2010 the first author conducted five individual semi-structured interviews with the following key informants: *oqsoqol* (informal leader of *mahalla*); *rais* (formal leader of *mahalla* committee); *dasturhonchi* (women ritual specialist in *mahalla*); *ustalar* (wedding logistics coordinators in *mahalla*); and *imam* (worship leader of a mosque). Key informants were selected on the basis of their role in the community, knowledge, willingness, and communicability. The interviews were more free-flowing and focused on such questions as the role of *mahalla* and the mosque in everyday life, the importance of monetary and gift exchanges in social interactions, local traditions, rituals and norms, the arrangement of life-cycle rituals, public perceptions of social hierarchies, kinship relations and status contestations within *mahalla*, and the perceived role of the state in everyday life. We used the questions mainly as a guide, adapting questions to the pace of interview. For instance, *rais* was asked a slightly different set of questions from *dasturhonchi*. The interviews lasted for between 45 minutes and 2 hours, depending on the informant's status, location and available time. The interview with *rais* took place in his office, while the other four interviews were conducted in *choyhona* (teahouse) or in private places. To protect the anonymity of our informants, we have not mentioned their names in the text.

### **Empirical findings – the case of weddings in rural Fergana**

Amongst numerous life-cycle rituals, *nikoh toi* (wedding ceremony) is the most central ceremony in rural Fergana, and one in which Uzbeks invest a great deal of their time, energy, resources, dreams, reputations and socio-economic status. *Nikoh toi* is often held inside the host family's home in rural Fergana. All *mahalla* residents, relatives, classmates, colleagues and friends are invited to the wedding ceremony. To turn down an invitation to a wedding is considered impolite. *Nikoh toi* is attended by, on average, approximately 200–500 guests. Men and women sit separately at different guest tables during *nikoh toi*. *Mahalla* is responsible for the organisation and preparation of such life-cycle rituals.

*Nikoh toi* also fulfils a redistributive and a risk-reducing function in rural Fergana: it is the social norm that directs each wedding guest to contribute to the wedding with money, gifts or labour. By arranging or attending a *nikoh toi*, a household broadens its social networks and engages in reciprocal transactions, since the wedding involves a great deal of exchange and reciprocation of money and material goods within networks of kin and friendship. Consequently, such large amounts of transactions during weddings enact the ties of obligations and



expectations within networks of kinship and friendship, blending the moral aspects of social relations with their material aspects.

*The morality of marriage transactions in rural Fergana*

The establishment of marriage relationships in rural Fergana is a lengthy and costly process. Marriage is not just a formal relationship between two young persons, but it is also an alliance between wife-takers and wife-givers that involves a life-cycle relationship. Usually the bride leaves her parents' house forever for the house of her groom. By tradition, a boy's parents should go first to the girl's family to ask for her hand in marriage. Before visiting the girl's home, the boy's family usually conducts a thorough investigation of the girl's personality and her family background by asking neighbours, *mahalla* elders, school teachers, and friends who may know the girl or her family. Since respect towards elderly people and gender hierarchies is a social norm in Uzbek society, the bride is expected to submit to the orders and wishes of her mother-in-law and groom without any objections. Therefore, the boy's family usually investigates the girl's behaviour (is she going to be a good submissive bride?), cooking skills, educational background and who is the dominant parent in the girl's family (her father or mother), and also the ancestors of the girl going back seven generations. If the girl and her family meet all these criteria, the boy's family pays a visit to the girl's family to ask for her hand in marriage. After receiving a marriage proposal from the boy's family, the girl's side investigates the boy in a similar fashion. If the girl's parents agree, the boy's family presents a white dress to the new bride's family. This pre-engagement ritual is called *oq kiydi* (white dressing). Parents often try to find a rich husband or wife for their children in order to elevate their socio-economic status in the *mahalla*. When we interviewed *Oqsoqol* and *dasturhonchi*, they said that social norms regarding girls' submissive behaviour and personal qualities do not matter much in relation to girls who come from rich families. Lured by expectations of expensive *sep-sarpo* (dowry and clothing gifts), the groom's family conducts very little or no investigation into the girl's behaviour, personal qualities and family history.

After this ritual, the groom's family sends a minimum of 80 kg of refined cotton to the bride's family, and the bride's family prepares bedspreads and sitting mattresses using this cotton. A *fotiha toi* (engagement ceremony) is the next stage. Prior to the wedding, *qudalar* (wife-takers and wife-givers) agree to organise a *fotiha toi* at the wife-givers' house. On the scheduled day, respected elders, neighbours and relatives come to the wife-givers' house, and *qudalar* perform a *non sindirish* (breaking of bread), a ritual that publicly declares the engagement of the new couple. *Qudalar* also exchange gifts with each other and set the exact date of a *nikoh toi*. The *qudalar* also discuss the most controversial issue – *sep-sarpo* – during *fotiha toi*. By tradition, prior to *nikoh toi*, the bride's family sends 40 trays loaded with a variety of fruits, confectionery, nuts and cooked and baked foods to the wife-takers' family.

Since a wedding includes numerous pre- and post-wedding ceremonies, enormous financial and labour resources are expended on wedding ceremonies. Uzbek parents usually save money for wedding feast expenses, and expensive *sep-sarpo*, almost all their life. According to social norms, parents should arrange their children's weddings and provide them with a house and household goods. The groom's family provides the married couple with separate rooms in the family house or a separate house to live in. In addition, before the wedding ceremony, the groom sends the *yuk* (bride-price) to the bride's family. A *yuk* often consists of two sheep, vegetables and rice for the wedding pilaf, 100 kg of flour, 10 kg of cotton, oil and traditional clothes for the bride. In return, the bride's family should fully furnish the groom's house and provide all necessary supplies that the young couple might need during the initial years of married life. Since the failure to comply with local norms might result in indirect sanctions, such as gossip and censure in the *mahalla*, both the bride's and the groom's family often take out interest-free loans from friends and relatives to preserve their reputation and social status in the *mahalla*. In most cases, the bride's family fails to comply with local norms, due to high *sep-sarpo* costs, and in turn faces *mahalla* sanctions.

As each wedding ceremony is subject to intense public discussion and gossip in the *mahalla*, weddings are transformed into a display of a family's wealth and social status. The local norms for gift exchange and *sep-sarpo* are maintained and reproduced through heavy social interactions in the *mahalla*. Since information networks in the *mahalla* are quick and comprehensive, a person can simply elevate his or her socio-economic status in *mahalla* by expending more on wedding feasts and gift-giving than others. The bride's *sep-sarpo* plays a crucial role in this process. By tradition, several women in the *mahalla* visit the groom's house to see and assess the bride's *sep-sarpo*, and hence, they conduct the bulk of *mahalla* information exchange regarding the *sep-sarpo*. The *sep-sarpo* also has a moral dimension: by looking at the quality and size of the *sep-sarpo*, *mahalla* women judge whether or not the bride's family holds the groom in respect. As the *sep-sarpo* has both a financial and moral dimension, it also determines the nature of power relations between a bride and her mother-in-law. Usually, brides with a high-quality *sep-sarpo* are decently treated by their mother-in-law, and brides with modest *sep-sarpo* are gossiped about by their mothers-in-law and women in the *mahalla*. When talking informally, we noticed that most households, despite their limited financial resources, were committed to expend a great deal of money on *sep-sarpo* in order to keep their honour and buy decent treatment for their daughters in the groom's family and the *mahalla*.

### *Preliminary analysis I*

Our fieldwork in rural Fergana shows that the practice of giving and taking of gifts and money has turned into institutionalised practice, in which economic and social life are permeated by large amounts of informal transactions. Networks of kinship and friendship are increasingly mobilised and tied to one another through the

exchange and reciprocation of money, material goods and services. Kandiyoti and Azimova (2004) noted that weddings are occasions when alliances are cemented through the exchange of gifts, mutual help and participation in crucial phases of marriage negotiations. The concern for monetary and gift exchanges is evident in all marriage negotiations and preparations. Wedding rituals are extremely geared towards money and gift exchanges. Such aspects of weddings have been widely discussed in the anthropological, theoretical and ethnographic literature in relation to, for example, Africa, the Middle East and Caucasus (Peters, 1990; Bates, 1974; Mundy, 1995; Yalçin-Heckmann, 2001), but also by Soviet and Western ethnographers in relation to Central Asian societies (Werner, 1997; Annaklychev, 1984; Borozna, 1984; Kandiyoti and Azimova, 2004).

The specificity of wedding transactions can be seen if they are examined within the framework of gift exchange proposed by Marcel Mauss (1990). To Mauss, a distinctive aspect of a gift exchange is that it engages the person in social relations of obligation and reciprocity, and therefore there is no pure gift. In this respect, the nature of wedding transactions in rural Fergana is consistent with Mauss's argument that the wedding transactions are not a pure gift exchange, since the spontaneity of the gift seems lacking. It is closer to a social norm, in the sense that the wedding host expects some gift or cash gift from each wedding guest. As we attended several weddings in rural Fergana, we have realised that money and gift exchanges are an inalienable part of social interactions. Even though weddings involve honourable practices, such as appreciative gift-giving and fulfilling moral obligations to help family and friends, it seems that the moral aspects of social relations are blended with their material aspects. Consequently, the socialisation of individuals in rural Fergana mainly takes place in an extremely monetised social environment, where individuals are bound to one another through the amount and type of (cash) gifts they exchange. This observation comes closer to Werner's (1997) description of wedding ceremonies in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. As Werner shows, despite post-Soviet economic collapse, many Kazakhs continue to expend a large amount of financial and labour resources on life-cycle rituals, since they provide a means for social networking and redistributive activities.

The quality and size of *sep-sarpo* plays a crucial role in determining one's social status in *mahalla* in relation to others. Due to the existence of strong social norms that support gift exchanges and networks of reciprocity, weddings have largely become sites of demonstrative and competitive exchanges of wealth between families and the community. This observation supports Sneath's (2006) argument that the exchange of gifts, goods and assistance can be better viewed as materialisations of various types of social relations. In her study of the political economy of Azeri weddings, Yalçin-Heckmann (2001) also demonstrated that wife-takers and wife-givers used the payments and the wedding arrangements for redefining their mutual status positions.

Financial and property transactions are the glue of marriage negotiations. Even though weddings involve enormous transactions, the nature of transactions is non-commercial; instead, they are increasingly geared to displaying one's social status

and power. Such features of wedding transactions represent what Gibson-Graham (1996) describes as non-capitalist economic forms. This observation may provide a starting point for us to reconsider the nature and context of other informal transactions in Uzbekistan, viewing transactions not so much as corruption and more as providing insight into the manifestations of social norms, status contestations and social hierarchies. This situation is comparable to the Russian case that Humphrey (2002: 146) describes as ‘the bribe is not in essence just a payment for a commodity or service but it is also recognition of a person’s socio-political, nonmarket status’.

#### *Festivities and rituals during the wedding day*

The *nikoh toi* starts at five o’clock in the morning, with a male-only event *nahor oshi* (morning *pilaf* feast) at the groom’s house. An identical *nahor oshi* is also arranged at the bride’s house. Joyful sounds of *karnay* and *surnay* (traditional Uzbek musical instruments) reach far from the house and signal to the whole *mahalla* that the wedding ceremony has begun. According to the social norms, each invited guest should give *toyana* (gifts, such as carpets, or cash gifts) while shaking hands with the head of the family. The value of the *toyana* depends on the type and nature of the relationship between the guest and the host household. Luxurious and cosy tables are often reserved for the people of influence, such as local government officials, police, highly educated people, successful businessmen and wealthy relatives and friends. The presence of people of influence in the wedding sends an important signal to *mahalla* that the wedding host is well-connected. Guests with lower socio-economic status and reputation are offered more modest tables. Guests leave the tables as soon as they have finished eating their *pilaf*, and the guest tables are hurriedly cleaned up to welcome new arrivals.

After the *nahor oshi*, the groom brings the bride from her house to the central mosque for a religious ritual. By tradition, during this ceremony the bride does not initially give her consent to the marriage, and the groom then gives some money to the bride’s side to get her consent. Money does not fulfil an economic purpose in this case, but it is a ritual payment for the bride’s consent.

The bride’s arrival at the groom’s house is the high point of the wedding party, as she is welcomed with joyful traditional Uzbek song and showered with sweets. The main wedding party begins with a *kelin salom* (bride’s greeting) ceremony to welcome the bride to the groom’s family. In this ceremony, the bride bows to greet everyone, ranging from the groom’s parents to neighbours. There is a special Uzbek song for this ceremony, and the singer tells the names and types of people to whom the bride should bow a greeting. By tradition, the people who are greeted by the bride are expected to come up in person to the front and give money to the bride; in this way, the bride receives money every time she greets a guest or her husband’s relatives and friends. Since brides cannot afford to buy new wedding gowns in rural Fergana, they usually rent one from local shops. The

money generated from the *kelin salom* ceremony is used to pay for such rental expenses.

The visibility of the money during the wedding dance is striking; everybody, ranging from children to the elderly, dances with money in their hands. This tradition is called *pul qistirish* (giving money). The amount of money that guests give depends on the age, social status and occupation of the dancing person. By giving money, a person can pay his or her respect and express loyalty to the person who is dancing. If the dancing person is the groom's father or a local government employee or a wealthy man, a large number of guests come up to him and give money. In such cases, it is possible to see a crowd of people lined up to give money to a dancing person. This is the most central aspect of the wedding where it can be seen how social status and reputation are translated into hard cash. After observing this, it is very easy to compare one person's social status and reputation with that of others. All the money generated during the dancing is given to the singer and musicians that are playing, as payment for their efforts.

The wedding ends with a women-only ceremony called *yuz ochdi* (unveiling of the bride). During this ceremony, the bride usually wears a white handkerchief to cover her face, and the groom's nephew unveils her face afterwards. Women sing traditional songs, and the groom's side and neighbours give gifts to the bride. Shortly after this ceremony, the bride is taken by *yanga* (female relative of the bride) to the room intended for the young couple where the bride gets ready to meet the groom. A few hours later, the groom accompanied by his best man appears at the threshold of the room where the bride is waiting for the groom. To gain access to the bride's room, the groom symbolically buys the bride from the *yanga* by means of a bargain; and then the *yanga* leaves the young couple alone for the night.

### *Preliminary analysis II*

One remarkable aspect of *nikoh toy* is that it articulates key orientations and features of various social structures towards kinship, gender roles, social inequalities and hierarchies, and the redistributive activities. In this respect, *nikoh toy* provides numerous ritual symbols through which individuals and groups can display their social status and power, and shape their relations with one another. The public acceptance of social hierarchies, status contestations and gender divisions becomes clearly articulated in *nikoh toy*. Men and women sit separated at different guest tables during the wedding. Status contestations and social hierarchies are even reflected in the placement of guests: people of influence are seated at the best tables and served more quickly than others. If people of influence dance during the wedding party, one can observe that the crowd of people hurriedly line up to give money to a dancing person. However, if the dancing person does not belong to the category of people of influence, very few people approach the dancing person with money. This is the most central aspect of the wedding that shows the importance of money as a means to display one's social status and prestige. This observation

reinforces Kandiyoti and Azimova's (2004) argument that the custom and ritual in Uzbekistan became the terrain upon which changing social stratification and widening disparities in wealth and status were played out through the medium of new patterns of consumption. Although it is always risky to draw parallels between different social contexts, social hierarchies that are omnipresent in Uzbek weddings could be comparable to North West American potlatch<sup>1</sup> culture, where gifts are distributed according to the rank of the receiver. During the potlatch, the donor (gift-giver), by giving the gift selectively, gives expression to the esteem in which he holds each recipient with respect to every other recipient (Barnett, 1938). Thus, the selective character of the gift is indicative of esteem, and reflects a judgement of comparative social worth from the particular donor's point of view (ibid.).

Another noteworthy feature of *nikoh toy* is the high visibility of *toyana* exchanges. Each guest is expected to give carpets or cash gifts to the wedding host. Since weddings are very expensive to hold, the *toyana* considerably lessens the burden of weddings on families, particularly in impoverished rural areas. As Kandiyoti (1998) noted, such a system of social obligations was already established during the Soviet period as an important strategy for social survival. White (1994) has described a similar situation in Turkey, where weddings were sites of redistributive activity and debt exchanges.

The major item on display during the *kelin salom* and wedding dance was – money. Payments made to the bride's side during the religious ritual reveal that the meaning of a monetary transaction is deeply embedded in the cultural practices. The conspicuous presence of money during the wedding dance fulfils more ritual role and serves to enhance the reputation of both money-giver and dancing person. Such an enormous visibility of the money during the wedding dance shows the deep embeddedness of money in local culture and traditions. From this perspective, the use of money and morality of exchanges that we have observed during weddings is consistent with Parry and Bloch (1989), who argued that the meaning of goods and money is significantly determined by local culture, political use and context.

As the example of *nikoh toy* shows, money is not only the matter of business or economic activity, but it also plays a very important cultural role in Uzbekistan: it acts as a glue in social interactions and solidarity, as a means of performing traditions, as a part of a traditional dance, as a way of paying respect, and many more. Since people dance holding money, since the *kelin salom* generates money, since hands are shaken with money, since respect is translated into hard cash, the money has turned into a social phenomenon, simply a culture of money. Looking at such a central role of money and gifts in the fulfilment of rituals, it is safe to say that there are informal structures which assign ceremonial and cultural meaning to informal transactions.

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1 The potlatch is a gift-giving ceremony and informal economic activity practised by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States.



### Concluding remarks

The aim of this study is to explore the social meaning and ordinary activities surrounding informal transactions in order to better understand the social context forming the premises and informing the meaning of corruption (especially among low-level officials) in Uzbekistan. We have argued that the informal transactions are mainly manifestations of social norms, a culture of money, characterised by networks of reciprocity and exchange. We have focused on socio-economic structures and their normative elements, drawing on the state-in-society perspective and the concept of social norms as a theoretical framework. The ethnographic data on wedding ceremonies was analysed in order to describe and understand the local perceptions of moral codes and values of informal transactions.

One could argue that the connection, painted in this chapter, between social practices in weddings and corruption is too tenuous. The reader might wish that we had done some observation of actual corruption in order to note the parallels, in structure and meaning, of exchanges at weddings and corruption in public transactions; hence, demonstrating the relation, rather than surmising it. However, it is important to underline that we did not set out to prove any causal relation between (a) social norms and practices in weddings and (b) corruption. Rather, our aim was to show the underlying social norms, moral codes and local perceptions in order to describe a society where corruption occurs. In a metaphorical sense, we are more interested in examining the soil than the actual wheat.

Our results can be summarised in three points: (a) informal transactions are deeply embedded in cultural practices; (b) not all informal transactions are corrupt; and (c) (when talking about, or measuring, corruption), social norms, moral codes and local perceptions should be considered. If these are not taken into consideration, informal transactions that are not corrupt run the risk of being labelled as illicit. 'Corruption' is an overly general term, which often simply masks competing sets of rules with those of the state. Similar points have been made before by scholars such as Werner (2000), Humphrey (2002) and Polese (2008). In that sense, our research could be said to empirically support findings of previous research, calling for a more nuanced view, at grass-roots level, of informal transactions in developing countries. Our research differs in one aspect from previous research, by focusing on interactions and exchange between ordinary citizens (and not on those between citizens and state officials). By adding this perspective, we underline the importance of understanding the very culture of the society in which corruption is being discussed and/or measured.

Even though the state in Uzbekistan might look omnipotent, due to its infrastructural and coercive capacity, our fieldwork suggests that it has limited meaning in the everyday life at local level. The decline of the Soviet-type welfare state spurred the monetisation of society in Uzbekistan, since the people in rural Fergana have become increasingly dependent on informal coping strategies for meeting their livelihood needs. The unrelenting increase in informal transactions during, for example, weddings (such as *toyana* and *pul qistirish*) is one illustration



of a general monetisation of society that gained momentum following the post-Soviet economic decline.

In the introduction of this chapter we state that we accept the definition of 'corruption' as Transparency International describes it: 'corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain'. However, we also stress the need to focus on the key word 'abuse' from a sociological understanding of the specific cultural context in which corruption is viewed. It is obvious that many of the activities that are considered to be corruption, from a pure Western perspective, have little to do with abuse. Rather, informal coping strategies are incorporated into Uzbek culture as a rational way of getting things done. Hence, anti-corruption measures are not simply a matter of getting people to obey the law. It is, more importantly, about promoting socio-economic change.

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