Economy of favours in Central Asia: *Tanish-bilish, kattalar* and *kichkina*

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"Ozbekni kichkinasi bolganan
Orisni gurjisi bolganing yahshi"
(It is better to be the Russians' little dog
than a "small Uzbek" among Uzbeks)

Introduction

Central Asia has been undergoing economic, political and social transformation in recent decades after gaining independence from the Soviet Union. The challenges have included economic collapse and decaying Soviet infrastructure, as well as political turbulence and global insecurities. As a result, political, economic and social insecurities have increased, as struggles for power and resource grabbing have created what scholars then characterized as *bespredel* (Turaeva 2014) and a time of *chaos* (Nazpary 2002). The region is not only an important geopolitical space, but also culturally diverse. The state generally retreated and other systems of belonging filled the void of state support (Turaeva 2016). Most Central Asian economies are largely remittance-dependent, state salaries are ridiculously low, state support varies from nominal to low, and as a result economies, justice systems, politics and markets have largely tended towards informalisation (Turaeva and Urinboyev 2021; Urinboyev 2020; Turaeva 2018a; Fryer et al. 2014; Nasritdinov 2016). This situation of economic necessity has been characterized by the absence of market and monetary transactions to mediate financial relationships between individuals and institutions. The post-Soviet model of the informal economy is associated largely with local orders and norms of acquisition and business deals carried out through personal networks (known as *blat* in Russian and *guanxi* in China), based on the principle of reciprocity (Hann and Hart 2011, 126).

Since 2008 all the Central Asian countries, particularly after multiple crises (economic, political, geopolitical, medical), have suffered the economic consequences of those events. Economic survival and security have been provided for more and more through kinship, family and other systems of belonging (Turaeva 2014, 2016). Debts, favours, duties, dependencies and other power relations have made up a major part of people's daily lives in Central Asia. These things have also become important reference sources for defining values and social relations.

Social roles and hierarchies are important for understanding the distribution of roles, capital and power within the framework of actual social relations. They apply everywhere, whether it be in public offices or in the private realm of social relations. The economy of favours is part of getting things done in circumstances in which state legal systems and other state infrastructure cannot fully address daily problems and provide for people's economic survival (Ledeneva 1998, 2001; Ledeneva and Seabright 2000). The economy of favours is based on various designations of social relationships, as well as reciprocity (different kinds of reciprocity). The status of each person is crucial for their roles and duties within such a complex system of an economy of favours. This complex web of relations is made up of so-called *tanish-bilish* networks, which serve as a basis for the economy of favours.[1] *Tanish-bilish* is an Uzbek word for strategic contacts who can solve problems or help one to achieve goals. For example, in German *Vitamin B* is slang for good connections, people who could help you by putting in a good word to help you get a job or some other thing (Diewald 1995).

As the saying at the head of this paper implies, there are *katta* (big) and *kichkina* (small) Uzbeks. They have other names in other countries in Central Asia, such as elders and juniors within social status systems (*ully* and *kidjik* in Turkmen). *Kichkina* and *katta* are the adjectives that define one's status in Uzbek society, and can be applied in all spheres of human activity, from personal and social life, to different levels of collective and political activities.[2] *Kichkina* refers to a person who is generally perceived to be in a lower social position and *katta* to someone in a higher one. Depending on the context *katta* and *kichkina* can mean elders and youngsters in a family context; in an office it would refer to the hierarchy there; within ethnic networks it refers to social status within the com-

munity. Age is an important variable in defining *katta* and *kichkina*, although not the only one. The use of the same terms to refer to a person's social status implies that the rules of designation, according to traditionally accepted principles, apply equally everywhere, independent of the context, whether it be in a formal situation – an office or any other public space – or at home. Furthermore, informal rules, such as the ones I describe within the framework of relations between *katta* and *kichkina*, override formal rules, such as official hierarchies determined by the rules of an office.[3]

I contend that an economy of favours is made up of *tanish-bilish*-like networks, in which social status is crucial for the designation of roles and duties, based largely on reciprocity (different kinds of reciprocity) and trust. The paper is organised in three parts. Part 1 outlines different forms of reciprocity, which largely define social relations. Part 2 introduces two important designations or divisions of people: *katta* and *kichkina* (*ully* and *kidjik* in Turkmen). Part 3 explains how such systems as *tanish-bilish* work in Central Asia, and that they can also be compared to *Vitamin B* systems in Germany or in other European contexts.

Reciprocity

Before I explain the status system of *kattalar* and *kichkina*, in which strategic networking is used to get things done, I will explain the key principle of reciprocity. Reciprocity is an important aspect of social and economic relations within the economy of favours. Reciprocity is one of the oldest classical anthropological concepts, widely discussed throughout anthropology and beyond (Sahlins 1972). In the context of Central Asia one may differentiate between important, less important, and superficial relations. These degrees of importance have local names which define them, how these relations should be reciprocated, as well as the role of each individual involved. They are based on various forms of reciprocity; balanced (*qaytarish garak*), generalized (*ot dushi, savab, sadaqa*) and negative (*paydalanish*) (Sahlins 1972). Sahlins (1972: 94) wrote that "reciprocity is always a 'between' relation: however solidary, it can only perpetuate the separate economic identities of those who so exchange."

From the emic perspective, reciprocity is differentiated into a giver and a taker.[4] Their views of the

exchange do not necessarily overlap and may at times be contradictory. The giver conceptualizes the transaction based on two main ideas about "reciprocity" and their relationship to the taker. On the other hand, the taker has their own theory about the transaction

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based on their interests, reciprocity and relationship to the giver, as well as future prospects. Reciprocity in this case is a somewhat abstract and subjective understanding of the participants in the transaction of exchange. Taking Sahlins' definition of reciprocity as "a relation in between", an emic perspective would find it difficult to arrive at a qualitative description as either generalized, negative or balanced, considering the contradictory understandings of a giver and taker, as well as their individual conceptions of reciprocity. When the two ideas of reciprocity do not match, conflicts of interests arise. Often individuals-receivers entertain their own ideas of reciprocity, which at times may be comparable to "free riding" (negative reciprocity), which they (recievers) see not as a negative but as a balanced reciprocity, in the sense that they "will also give back and, if not, then God will [pay] the providers back".[5] There are of course other variables than reciprocity that contribute to the bonds in these social relations.

Kattalar and Kichkina

Social status systems in Central Asia are not only based on age, but are also highly gendered. Women have a different status system than men, which is defined in terms of age, marital status, social positioning, kinship and capital (diverse types of capital).[6] *Kichkina* refers to a person who is generally perceived to occupy a lower social position, and *katta* (adjective) a higher one (*kattalar* is the plural form). Particular duties and responsibilities are expected of individuals according to their perceived status within a given community. For instance, younger females of any fam-

ily are always expected to help and cannot appear in public: if they are guests, they stay either in the kitchen or in a separate room with the children and other young women. Elderly people are always respected, while young men are expected to earn money and support their families. Both of the terms are relative to the person or community by which the individual is perceived. In one relationship or context a person can be *kichkina ("small")* and in another *katta ("big")*. A person's status can be defined either in reference to another person, or within a given community. In both contexts, individuals' status depends on the social relations with others.

The social status of any person starts at home. In any family unit there are *kattala* to whom all others must listen and obey. They can also be compared to elders, whose status is mainly age and gender based. Within smaller family units *kattalar* is mainly synonymous with age sets. Age and gender are the main factors defining any person's social status. Within larger kinship groups *kattalar* are defined not only through age and gender but also status within the group, defined additionally by their social capital, economic capital, as well professional status. *Katta* (big) can also be used as a noun to define a person of higher status; *kattalar* is a plural noun denoting more a category of people of higher status. In a formal context, such as an office, the designation *katta* is defined not only by position within the office but also social capital and social status in general within the circles known in the context. It is not always necessarily the case that a boss will automatically be treated as *katta*; it may apply to someone under him, depending on their power outside the given office, in addition to age, gender and economic capital. Besides the designated duties within a particular office, if someone is not *katta* but rather *kichkina* they are prepared to obey all kinds of orders not directly related to their job duties. The person who has the status of *katta* in the office is flexible about the use of their power in the office, to the extent of sending a *kichkina* person to do their shopping. The status of *katta* is designated by the relationship between *katta* and *kichkina*, both on the dyadic level of social relations, as well as at a group level. The status of *katta* is always relational and therefore not fixed: in one constellation one can be *katta* and in another *kichkina*.

Tanish-bilish

One always needs *tanish-bilish* if one is in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan or Germany. Without *tanish-bilish* one cannot get a good job, do good business, or get an appointment with a good doctor. Etymologi-

cally the term *tanish-bilish* consists of two full words: *tanish* (acquaintance), and *bilish,* which is a gerund form of the verb *bilmak* and can be translated as "getting to know". It can also be written in unhyphenated form as *tanish bilish.* Related terms in other Turkic languages include *tanish orqilu* in Kyrgiz, *tanis bilu* in Kazakh, *daniş biliş* in Turkmen, *tanysh-bilish* in Tatar, and *tanysh-bilish* in Kumyk (Alekseev 2011: 1).

Tanish bilish in Uzbekistan or *Vitamin B* in Germany refer to networks or contacts used for extracting both material and non-material resources, or just for "getting things done" (*ishingni bitirish*). *Tanish-bilish* literally translates as "acquaintance-known", and may thus be considered a form of social capital. Schatz has described *tanish-bilish* as "access networks", but claims they are often mistaken for clan networks (Schatz 2004: 62). In *tanish-bilish* networks, families and other forms of kinship play a primary role in terms of affiliation and the strength of the ties. However, other ties cross-cut or overlap within the same networks, including sub-ethnicities, regional identity, clan identity, professional belonging and various kinds of friendships (*tanish, dost, chin dost*).

The *Uzbek Explanatory Dictionary* (2007: 664) defines *tanish-bilish* as, "Individual(s) who know each other and have some degree of contact" ("*Bir-birini tanijdigan va ma'lum jihatdan aloqa munosabati bor shahs(lar)*"). It gives the following example: "Well, doctor, nowadays whichever institute/university you go to only the children of *tanish-bilish* pass the entrance exam." ("*Endi, dohtir, hozir qaysi institutga borsangiz, tanish-bilishning bolasi kiradi*"). The term can also be found in Uzbek sayings, proverbs, and songs. The Uzbek proverb *Bir ko'rgan — tanish, ikki ko'rgan — bilish* can be translated as "once seen is *tanish*, twice seen is *bilish*". The meaning is that *tanish-bilish* can be established after meeting a person just once or twice. In contemporary Uzbek poetry one can also find such sayings as: "*Таниш-билиш сотиб олишинг мумкин, лекин до'стларни эмас …*" This can be translated as "one can buy *tanish-bilish* but not friends". The Uzbek film *Bur-ilish* featured a song entitled "*Tanish-bilish*", sung by Ruslan Sharipov and Dilshod Abdullaev, which included the lyric "*Tanish-bilish bular borki bitar har bir yumush, dostum buyogini ozing kelish*" ("If one has *tanish-bilish* one can accomplish any task, achieve things and from there on, my friend, you handle it").

The term *tanish-bilish* is used both as a noun to refer to the networks themselves, and as a verb for describing the actions/exchanges involved. As an example of the former, the travel writer Christopher Alexander (2009) relates the following comment by a newly-made local acquaintance, who offered to help Alexander when he was struggling to find a place to live:

I understand that it is very difficult for you newcomers without *tanish bilish* here in our country, and yet you are our guests and you have come to help us. I have lots of *tanish bilish* and I will help you find a house. Come and live in my house until we find somewhere for you to live. (Alexander 2009)

There are two important aspects of *tanish-bilish* networks that are central to understanding their content and functional principles. First, there is the hierarchical dimension of social relations. Generational differences often overlap with social status, such as *katta* (big) and *kichkina* (small). Secondly, there are the dimensions of strength and duration of social relations mentioned above, such as superficial/short-term (*bardi-galdi*/come-go, *yuzaki*/superficial, *vaqtincha*/temporary), and more intensive and long-term (*boshqacha, muhim*) which are based on various reciprocities; balanced (*qaytarish garak*), generalized (*ot dushi, savab, sadaqa*) and negative (*paydalanish*) (Sahlins 1972).

These different types of reciprocities are important in any kind of exchange but particularly important in making distinctions in relation to *tanish-bilish* exchange networks. For instance, if one uses very important contacts in one's *tanish-bilish* then this would suggest a form of balanced reciprocity. *Tanish-bilish* networks usually have a strategic character and are used to extract resources of various kinds while avoiding formal rules as much as possible, as well as to solve problems. They enable informal exchanges that resemble the Soviet practice of *blat,* inasmuch as exchanges are based on favours of different kinds and not limited to informal payments ("I scratch your back and you scratch mine") (Ledeneva 1998). *Blat* is described by Ledeneva as an informal exchange within personal and kinship networks, through which both material and non-material capital flows. Sometimes *tanish-bilish* is translated into Russian as *po blatu,* for instance in media reports.

One of the strategies used within *tanish-bilish* exchanges is what can be called the "politics of naming". This strategy involves naming a very influential person or key official within the relevant sphere/field where one needs to "get things done" (*ishni bitqazish*) as a door-opener or a problem-solver. A typical example of this strategy is if one gets caught by traffic police in Uzbekistan. The first thing a driver does is demonstratively telephone someone either real and influential, or somebody fake who pretends to be an important person. The second step is to offer the phone to the police officer. If the strategy is successful the driver will be free to go without punishment; if he is not,

more phone calls are made and as a last resort a bribe may be negotiated.

Informal networks have long played an important role at all levels of social and economic interactions, not only in Uzbekistan but in Central Asia in general (Schatz 2004). Under Soviet rule they were particularly important as the elite was divided into regional clan groups, which played a decisive role in Uzbekistan's political development. Although the Soviets influenced the social and political make-up of Central Asian societies, undermining pre-Soviet social structures, they also had to work with those structures to some extent. Clanship, together with other kinship and friendship networks played a crucial role in people's orientations within their professional and social lives, and in Uzbekistan in particular political leadership was designed around clans and regional belonging (Carlisle 1986).

Tanish-bilish networks are strongly based on the principle of patron–client relations. Eisenstadt and Roninger (1980: 48, 1984) identified such variables as hierarchy, asymmetry, inequality, autonomy, spirituality, power, kinship and friendship when analysing patronage and clientelism. The same authors (Eisenstadt and Roninger 1980) described patron–client relations as relations of power and asymmetry, which direct flows of resources and structure societal relations. If the social status of a person who is seeking to use *tanish-bilish* is lower (*kichkina*) than that of the person providing the favour, then by definition the latter acts as a patron and the former as a client in this transaction. The same client and the same patron can very well exchange their roles depending on the circumstances and also depending on who is providing the service for whom.

Post-Soviet social and economic crises, coupled with growing uncertainties about the future, have led people to rethink their survival strategies and social navigation through societal and political systems. Trust networks of *tanish-bilish* served to support the needs of their members and reproduced social relations of patronage and clientelism. Regional groups that formed during Soviet rule (Carlisle 1986) have persisted as the basis of *tanish-bilish* networks. Since the state legal system and state administration collapsed or became defunct after the collapse of the Soviet Union, alternative (informal) systems of patron–client relations have served as an alternative space for "getting things done" in post-Soviet Central Asia. The networks of *tanish-bilish* have filled the void left by the state legal system and state administration, to accommodate the basic needs of ordinary people, as well as "getting things done" at the higher level of state administration and politics.

Economy of favours in Central Asia

The examples of social status systems such as *kattalar* and *kichkina* (*ully* and *kidjik* in Turkmen or other names in other Central Asian countries), varying kinds of reciprocities which are also locally defined according to status systems, *tanish-bilish* networks or *Vitamin B* kinds of connection show how economies of favours work for many people to solve problems, find solutions or just survive economically and socially in contexts such as Central Asia. The economy of favours in the Central Asian context is embedded in a complex web of social relations in which kinship, family and other systems of belonging matter. Power relations such as patron–client relations are central to understanding such a complex web of social relations and status systems.

In the process of getting things done or solving a problem it is very practical to have important names and contacts at hand. It is not unusual to see people stopped by traffic police picking up their phone to call someone important who might help them out. The politics of naming can work at different levels, such as just naming a person to get things done or solve a problem or getting them to speak directly to someone such as a police officer, who is causing trouble for the person in need of help. Depending on the status of the person named the problem may be resolved. For example, a traffic policeman can let the driver go without any consequences.

The politics of naming is embedded within networks of *tanish-bilish* and status systems of *katta* and *kichkina* based on various forms of reciprocity and trust. These complex relations are also largely embedded within the system of clientelism and patronage. Power is central within unequal relations and plays a significant role in the reproduction of inequalities and unequal access to resources. Power and agency are related concepts and are to be considered within the framework of structural constraints and possibilities. Economic and political processes create a particular context in which structural constraints for individual action are created, which in turn opens up possibilities or options for other individuals who are in a more a powerful position, who can make decisions or are in a position to solve problems. This kind of configuration creates unequal positions and situations in which certain groups and individuals are more privileged than others. These particular structural constraints partly define the agency of actors with status and capital. As a result, other individuals with restricted options and less agency fall into the power of actors privileged by status and capital.[7]

Giddens (1986: xxvii) talks about "constraining aspects of structural properties of social systems", but it is important to remember that there can be also benefits for other actors which are set aside. In the given context the "structural constraints" are low payment or non-payment practices in state agencies in which state officials are themselves caught up within economies of favours and various dependencies, whereas others are left without state support to survive on their own. These constraints not only impede the actions of clients, lessening their options and agency, but also open up structural possibilities for such actors as patrons who have different statuses and capital. Their possibilities include the resources they are in a position to control (employment, other services for solving problems or access to other resources) and are in a position to redistribute them among their clients. Actors in power positions have a say over certain resources, and possess the capacity and knowledge to create their own "markets", with their own rules and principles of redistribution. As one of my Tashkenti informants said: "*Hayot bu bozor*" **(Life is a market!)** The term "market" carries a wider meaning here than it usually does in the economic understanding of the term. The term "market" allows the definition of a space in which services are offered and negotiated, and transactions take place in a variety of forms and content. The rules are defined and predefined by both actors and structures in which capital and status play important roles.

The agency of dependents is limited, but that does not mean it is absent. It would be erroneous to maintain that they are merely the passive recipients of the wills and intentions of those more influential and powerful than them. Giddens (2000: 93) argues that power relations are "*two-way*" and "are relations of autonomy and dependence, but even the most autonomous agent is in some degree dependent, and the most dependent actor or party in a relationship retains some autonomy". Foucault (1982: 790) also pointed to the same observation by stating that the exercise of power is not possible without one important element, which is freedom. In other words, "[p]ower is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free". This implies that the dependent actor has chosen to enter the dependent relationship with their own interests and benefits in mind.

In the above "market", the options for those who have limited choices are in competition with others. Knowledge of possible benefits in the market is channelled through certain networks (*tanish-bilish*), economies of favours, markets – access to which is defined in terms of status systems (*kattalar* and *kichkina*) – and reciprocity.

Concluding remarks

In this short article I have highlighted some of the aspects of the economy of favours in Central Asia, focusing on Uzbek examples, namely *tanish-bilish* (similar to the German Vitamin B system), *systems of an economy of favours, and status systems of kattalar and kichkina*. Furthermore, I have shown some principles related to how an economy of favours works in Central Asia, focusing on *tanish-bilish* networks for maintaining what I call the politics of naming. The politics of naming is widespread in Central Asia and basically involves settling things and problems by naming important people relevant to the field of the problem or its solution. It may be a legal problem, being stopped by traffic police, crossing borders, or just getting bad marks in school or university. As favours are not free, return favours are expected, and I outlined what emic definitions of reciprocity look like. Furthermore, I showed that relations of authority and patron–client relations cannot simply be explained by corruption alone, because the system of an economy of favours in Central Asia is based upon many different aspects of social relations, such as kinship, ethnicity and other belonging systems, as well as reciprocity.

The economy of favours in Central Asia has wider socio-political implications for justice systems, where unequal access to particular networks, status systems and resources are crucial for negotiating problems and solutions. Unequal access to resources also has socio-economic implications, where the same status systems can reproduce inequalities and further dependencies within power relations, such as patron–client relations. In the context of local markets, "markets" being broadly defined and embedded within a complex web of social relations, power and agency are closely related concepts. "Life is a market" was one of the clearest statements on this, which has stayed with me and has provided me with a kind of framing for defining economic and other life projects of the individuals I met and knew previously in the field and at home (Uzbekistan and Germany). Wider definitions of markets and economic relations beyond simplistic rational choice theories are relevant at least in the context of Central Asia and make sense to the actors on the ground I met in different countries and different contexts.

Systematic anthropological studies in the field of the economy of favours are scarce and more are needed from post-Soviet economies. Qualitative research on the economy of favours in Central Asia would be very helpful in explaining power relations, and other survival strategies, as well as social status systems and gender relations.

Endnotes

1 See the encyclopedia entry on *tanish-bilish* in the *Encyclopedia of Informality* (Turaeva 2018b).

2 Other works on questions of power and status in other Central Asian contexts include, for example, Edmunds (1998) and Collins (2006).

3 See Turaeva (2016) for detailed ethnographic material that shows examples of relations between *kattalar* and *kichkina*.

4 I deliberately avoid using the term "receiver" because this word implies the aspect of acceptance, which is ambiguous in this context.

5 Alisher, 27, a Khorezmian client of the *propiska* office in Tashkent, Tashkent 2006.

6 I have no space here to elaborate on the issues of gender, which I have already done elsewhere.

7 See Baldwin (1980) for a conceptual analysis of relations between power and interdependence.

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