

ЧЫГЫШ ТААНУУНУН МАСЕЛЕЛЕРИ

ВОПРОСЫ ВОСТОКОВЕДЕНИЯ

ISSUES OF ORIENTAL STUDIES

e-ISSN: 1694-8653

№1/2026, 1-8

УДК: 316.346.2-055.2(575)

DOI: [10.52754/16948653_2026_1_1](https://doi.org/10.52754/16948653_2026_1_1)

WOMEN, KINSHIP, AND PROPERTY IN CENTRAL ASIA

БОРБОРДУК АЗИЯДАГЫ АЯЛДАР, ТУУГАНДЫК БАЙЛАНЫШТАР ЖАНА МЕНЧИК
ЖЕНЩИНЫ, РОДСТВЕННЫЕ СВЯЗИ И СОБСТВЕННОСТЬ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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Abstract

This article examines the interconnections between gender, kinship, and property relations in Central Asia within Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. It argues that women's social status cannot be understood solely through the lens of victimhood or empowerment, but must be analyzed within the broader framework of kinship systems, marriage practices, property regimes, and labor contributions. While international organizations promote neoliberal models of gender equality grounded in individual property rights, such approaches often overlook the embeddedness of property relations in moral values, extended family networks, and culturally specific understandings of provision and reciprocity.

Drawing on anthropological literature and ethnographic insights, the article highlights how women's agency is shaped by their position within systems of inheritance, bride price, dowry, and intergenerational support. It explores the tensions between Soviet legacies of female emancipation, post-Soviet nationalism, Islamic revival, and Western gender discourses. The study demonstrates that women in Central Asia simultaneously navigate patriarchy, economic necessity, and kin-based obligations, often using culturally embedded strategies to negotiate power and security. By foregrounding local women's perspectives, the article calls for a more nuanced understanding of gendered subjectivities and property relations beyond universalist frameworks.

Keywords: Gender; Kinship; Property Relations; Central Asia; Marriage; Bride Price; Dowry; Women's Agency; Inheritance; Post-Soviet Transformations.

БОРБОРДУК АЗИЯДАГЫ АЯЛДАР, ТУУГАНДЫК БАЙЛАНЫШТАР ЖАНА МЕНЧИК

Аннотация

Бул макалада Борбордук Азия өлкөлөрүндөгү гендер, туугандык мамилелер жана менчик мамилелеринин өз ара байланышы советтик жана постсоветтик контекстте талданат. Аялдардын социалдык абалы жалаң гана курмандык же эмансипация түшүнүктөрү аркылуу эмес, туугандык система, нике эрежелери, менчик режими жана үй-бүлөдөгү эмгек салымынын негизинде каралат. Эл аралык уюмдардын гендердик теңчиликке багытталган неолибералдык мамилеси жеке менчик укуктарына басым жасаганы менен, менчик мамилелеринин моралдык баалуулуктарга, кеңири туугандык тармактарга жана маданий түшүнүктөргө бекем байланышын толук эске албайт. Антропологиялык адабияттарга жана этнографиялык байкоолорго таянуу менен, макалада аялдардын агенттүүлүгү мурас бөлүштүрүү, калың, сеп жана муундар аралык колдоо системаларындагы орду аркылуу калыптанары көрсөтүлөт. Совет доорундагы аялдардын эмансипациясы, постсоветтик улутчулдук, исламдык жандануулар жана Батыштын гендердик идеяларынын ортосундагы карама-каршылыктар талданат. Изилдөө Борбордук Азиядагы аялдардын тажрыйбасын жергиликтүү көз караш аркылуу кароо зарылдыгын негиздеп, гендер жана менчик маселелерин комплекстүү түшүндүрүүгө багытталат.

Ачкыч сөздөр: Гендер; Туугандык байланыштар; Менчик мамилелери; Борбордук Азия; Нике; Калың; Сеп; Аялдардын агенттүүлүгү; Мурас; Постсоветтик өзгөрүүлөр

ЖЕНЩИНЫ, РОДСТВЕННЫЕ СВЯЗИ И СОБСТВЕННОСТЬ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

Abstract

В статье рассматриваются взаимосвязи гендера, родственных отношений и собственности в странах Центральной Азии в советском и постсоветском контекстах. Положение женщин анализируется не только через призму жертвы или эмансипации, но и в рамках системы родства, брачных практик, имущественных режимов и трудового вклада членов семьи. Подчеркивается, что неолиберальные подходы международных организаций, основанные на индивидуальных правах собственности, нередко игнорируют укорененность имущественных отношений в моральных нормах, расширенных семейных сетях и культурно обусловленных представлениях о взаимных обязанностях и обеспечении.

Опираясь на антропологические исследования и этнографические материалы, автор показывает, что агентность женщин формируется их положением в системе наследования, калыма, приданого и межпоколенческой поддержки. Анализируются противоречия между советским наследием женской эмансипации, постсоветским национализмом, религиозным возрождением и западными гендерными дискурсами. Делается вывод о необходимости более комплексного и контекстуального понимания гендерных субъектностей и имущественных отношений в регионе.

Ключевые слова: Гендер; Родство; Имущественные отношения; Центральная Азия; Брак; Калым; Приданое; Женская агентность; Наследование; Постсоветские трансформации

Introduction

In recent years, the Internet and social media have brought attention to domestic violence against women in Central Asia, as well as the suicide of young married women, bride kidnappings, early arranged marriages, and conservative beliefs (such as the insistence that brides be virgins). Central Asia is known for strong kinship systems with traditional marriage patterns. Though these ostensibly protect women and children, serving as a safety net and security provider, the prevalence of various forms of violence against women cuts against this.

Some women justify domestic violence, participate in bride kidnappings and arranged marriages, and encourage their daughters to stay with their husbands' families despite hardships. Such women, who defend "traditional" norms, are attacked for being backward and unintelligent for their acceptance of their "property" status. They are marginalized and valued less as valid producers of knowledge, and as such are "muted" not only locally, but also internationally. Yet it is crucial to consider all women's voices, as well as the experiences, incentives, and constraints that encourage women to maintain these traditional practices. Only in this way can we see the complexity of gendered subjectivities.

There is also a context worth examining more closely: the impact of the Soviet era and post-Soviet changes on the lives of women in Central Asia. The situation of Central Asian women is different in some respects from that of women in other parts of the world. The Soviet and post-Soviet experience can be described as "neither colonized nor modern."^[1] Central Asian women live within a system that has maintained its traditional kinship structure, arranged marriage rules, and gendered control of resources. Yet they are also actively involved in local economies. They are the social and cultural drivers of a particular kind of change and adaptation.

International donors and agencies follow their neoliberal notion and ground economic gender empowerment in individual property rights, in opposition to social norms and customs that would hinder women's economic rights. Their main agenda, therefore, is empowering women by increasing gender equality through the provision of access to land rights and other resources. What this misses, however, is the complexity of women's position in Central Asia: the multiple meanings underpinning the concept of women being viewed as 'property' and local women's perceptions of property. These aspects need to be examined through the lens of kinship and marriage systems and power/hierarchy relations in Central Asia. Kinship and marriage are a fundamental cultural horizon for Central Asians, informing how women think through these legal, social, and political categories. Indeed, women could be empowered by their membership of large extended-kin networks.

Soviet Heritage vs Strong Nationalism; Islam and Conservatism vs Western Ideas

On the one hand, we have the Soviet legacy of women's emancipation, which not only allows, but actively encourages, women to engage in the wider economy through work as well as looking after children. On the other hand, with the collapse of the USSR, we have witnessed the revival of Islam, conservatism, and traditionalism, due primarily to the promotion of nationalism. Western donors, too, have influenced the situation by promoting gender equality and individual private property. Thus, women are caught between the Soviet heritage and strong nationalism, between

conservative Islam and Western ideas. It is under these conditions that they claim their right to work and hold property.

Based on a significant body of anthropological literature covering many parts of the world, I argue that a decisive factor for women's overall status is their position in the system of property relationships: as actual and potential property owners, as potential items of property themselves, and as providers—as well as recipients—of productive and reproductive labor. Together, labor and property transactions comprise the bundle of practical activities known as “provision.”[2] Provision practices tend to influence and be influenced by understandings of social identity.

In my long-term projects, I explore property through the prism of women's worldviews, looking at how kinship and the marriage system shape understandings of property relations outcomes in comparative context. While giving voice to Central Asian women, I also engage with postcolonial discussions of feminist anthropology and women's property relations.

Gender and Property Relations

Various studies of post-socialist countries[3] have dealt with the concept of property in terms of relations, morality, and embeddedness. Property relations are embedded in wider social relations and moral values in post-socialist countries. However, there is only limited literature on the intersection of gender and property relations in post-socialist countries.[4] For its part, scholarship on Central Asia has explored historical and contemporary approaches to property—especially land, grazing rights, livestock, and land grabs[5]—while neglecting to look at women's property relations through the prism of marriage and the kinship system.[6] There are several reasons for this, most of them methodological.

The property regime is so important to gender issues because property is not, as it is often considered, merely ownership. Instead, property can fruitfully be seen as bundles of rights. Not all these bundles necessarily amount to full ownership. Property also manifests itself in distinct layers: the level of ideology; the institutional level, which includes regulations; the level of legal relationships; and the level of actual relationships. It is important to understand why the ideology of protection does not translate one-to-one into actual protection.[7]

In my case, when I was 27 years old, I ‘learned’ that I owned one hectare of land in Kyrgyzstan. Somehow, however, I was not made aware that I was entitled to this land until my brother needed my signature as proof that I had legally rejected the land to which I was entitled. I was surprised that I had inherited land from my family. When I wanted to keep it for myself, my sisters became angry with me and asked, “Why won't you give the land to our brother? You cannot claim any property from your family members because you are married; and the younger brother is taking care of our parents.” My family had not wanted me to know about my land so I would not use my agency. My case is atypical, but some women might know their property rights even if they don't claim them.

Central Asia: An Ideal Place to Study Gender

Central Asia is an ideal place to study the paradoxical configuration of women, maintenance of kinship systems, and property in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts and adapting to new realities.[8] The women of Central Asia, with their Soviet and post-Soviet experiences, can offer new insight into feminist anthropological discussions by examining kinship, marriage, and property from a different perspective to ‘White European’ and ‘American’ feminists, or other postcolonial countries.

Central Asia is a good laboratory for the investigation of contradictions because these primarily Muslim societies feature diverse modes of social organization. All of them belong to the Turkic group (Uzbeks, Turkmens, Kyrgyz, Uighurs, Kazakhs), except for the Tajiks, who have linguistic and cultural ties with Iran. There are, however, long-standing differences in kin terminologies between historically nomadic and sedentary peoples. Thus, kinship is a significant domain and source of cultural diversity in regional countries—yet to date it has hardly been examined by a comparative anthropology of kinship.

Anthropologists have long known that Kyrgyz, Kazaks, Tajiks, and Uzbeks trace their ancestry differently—and thus marry according to very different rules. Traditionally, most ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazaks were mobile herders or pastoral nomads; they mainly engaged in livestock breeding. By contrast, ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks were sedentary farmers and urbanites; their main occupations were as craftsmen and traders. Consequently, Kyrgyz and Kazaks resided in mountainous places and Uzbeks and Tajiks in the grasslands. They have different residence rules, descent systems, terminologies, and marriage strategies. Kyrgyz and Kazakhs receive a bride price (*kalyng*) as compensation for the loss of their daughters' economic services, while Uzbeks and Tajiks organize a dowry (*sep*) as a pre-mortem inheritance for their daughters. Through the institutions of dowry and bride price, families negotiate rights in persons and property transmission.

In addition to kinship in the economic and domestic spheres, there are local ideas of kinship related to property. Such ideas differ in their symbolic realm, spatial aspects, the exchangeability of property, and relatedness. I treat these local ideas seriously and explore how they differ in different kinship systems.

Ethnography from Central Asia should be in dialogue with debates on gender and kinship, marriage, and property. Here, there are many similarities between women in Central Asia and their counterparts in Africa and the Middle East, especially when it comes to their strong faith in kinship, property, and power. In general, the feminist anthropology has remained powerful in challenging essentialist theories developed in Western countries,[9] demonstrating that different cultures have different arrangements for kinship, marriage, and property. Applied to Central Asia, this approach would examine Central Asian women's worldviews through the prism of Central Asian women themselves, thereby proposing alternative approaches to understanding kinship, marriage, and strategies for caring for daughters, as well as matrilineal ideas.

There is a difference between using local people's own ideas to understand property as a category of analysis and using outside theory. Strathern, for example, avoided the concept of property altogether, although she did deal with other issues related to things and persons, objects and subjects, that contribute beyond European or Euro-American notions of property. Identifying women and local ideas offers new perspectives on ways in which women in Central Asia create and perpetuate relationships.[10] For example, there is a local idea of treating daughters as vulnerable (Uzb. *Ojiza*) and the associated ideal of providing for a daughter's "security" in marriage. *Ojiza* is a strategy of individuals in a patriarchy; through it, women can exert a degree of agency by using it to call for support.[11].

Is "Culture" the Main Cause of Both Women's Victimization and Their Empowerment?

Should local society, "culture" or kinship be blamed for women's situations? On the one hand, claims about women being men's "property" may be being used inappropriately and in contexts far

removed from any system of local/kin-based checks and balances. At the same time, it is an inescapable fact that when a woman's kin and her husband's kin work together to force her to stay married, she may have nowhere to go.

Women often stay in such relationships because they are dependent on their husband—not because they are seen as their husband's property, but because a woman alone would not be able to earn sufficient income to support herself (and possibly her children). In many cases, a woman's position in society and the family is her choice: she wants to remain married despite challenges and occasional domestic violence in order to maintain access to a certain income. Then again, it may be that patriarchy prevents women from getting jobs, making them dependent on their husbands for income. In such a context, women must use patriarchy to exercise their agency. This is exactly what Kandiyoti argued decades ago in her work “Bargaining with patriarchy”[12].

Despite the efforts of international organizations to improve the condition of women, women themselves maintain the patriarchy (even its violent aspects), engage in bride kidnapping and arranged marriages, and encourage tradition in invisible ways. Local voices of women help to illuminate their vision of the world, explaining how they envision the kinship system, marriage rules, work, and property relations.

New media, the Internet, and social media platforms have opened new ways for women to express their visions of the world, even if their voices are controversial and different from those of experts, international organizations, and activists. There is, of course, a need for greater protection and regulation of virtual environments to support those who use them.

Economy and Culture Intersect

In this context, it is important to look at the intersection of property, work, and family relations (specifically, the economic contribution of wife and husband, parents and children, to the household). Individual families can be understood as single economic units. Each member makes a complementary economic contribution, such that the sum of several members' efforts makes up the total household economy. In other words, the hypothesis of “labor and inheritance” can be applied, meaning if one contributes to household labor, one is entitled to inherit. In families, labor is organized on the basis of kinship relations, age, and gender.

Nevertheless, the value of women's economic and social contribution can vary between ethnic groups. In some ethnic cultures, women who look after children and help in the household are very valuable; others, such as the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, encourage women to engage in paid work. Intergenerational transmission of property and marriage payments (dowry and bride-price)[13] are also linked to family economic transactions and compensation. The combination of identity and indebtedness is at the root of bride price and dowry.[14] Depending on the economic basis, contribution, and change, different identities face changes. These lead to a change in the values and status of women and their economic contribution.

The Western notion of patriarchy does not apply to Central Asia, as in many cases women choose their position in their societies and families. Women want to stay in a marriage despite pressure and occasional domestic violence, as they want to have access to certain income. At the same time, it may be that patriarchy prevents women from getting jobs and generating income, making them dependent on their husbands for money. Economy and culture intersect.

[1] Kandiyoti, Deniz (2007) 'The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern?' *Central Asian Survey*, 26:4, 601 — 623.

[2] Patrick Heady and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, "Implications of Endogamy in the Southwest Eurasian Highlands: Another Look at Jack Goody's Theory of Production, Property and Kinship," *History and Anthropology* 31, no. 2 (2020): 257–281.

[3] Chris Hann, "Property, Neoliberalism and Rural Privatization. Overview," in *Property Relations: The Halle Focus Group, 2000-2005* (Halle/Saale: Max-Planck-Institut für Ethnologische Forschung, 2005); Chris Hann, "The State of the Art. A New Double Movement? Anthropological Perspectives on Property in the Age of Neoliberalism," *Socio-Economic Review* 5 (2007): 287; Katherine Verdery, "Fuzzy Property: Rights, Power, and Identity in Transylvania's Decollectivization," in *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, ed. Michael Burowoy and Katherine Verdery (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 53-82; Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey, eds., *Property in Question. Value Transformation in the Global Economy* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare. Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

[4] Exceptions are Frances Pine, "Reproducing the House: Kinship, Inheritance and Property Relations in Southern Poland," in *Distinct Inheritances: Property, Family and Community in Changing Europe*, ed. Hannes Grandits and Patrick Heady (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2003), 279-295; and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, "Remembering the Dead and the Living of the Kolkhoz and Sovkhoz: Past and Present of Gendered Rural Life in Azerbaijan," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2005): 425–440.

[5] Paolo Sartori, "Introduction: Dealing with States of Property in Modern and Colonial Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 29, no. 1 (2010): 1-8; Sarah Robinson, Chantsalkham Jamsranjav, and Kramer Gillin, "Pastoral Property Rights in Central Asia: Factors and Actors Driving the Reform Agenda," *Études rurales* 200, no. 2 (2017): 220-253.

[6] Except a few scholars by whom I am inspired, including Deniz Kandiyoti (2007).

[7] See Keebet von Benda-Beckmann's work on bundles of rights and Judith Beyer's work on social protection. Benda-Beckmann, Franz von, Keebet von Benda-Beckmann and Melanie G. Wiber (2006) 'The properties of property'. *Changing properties of property*. Ed. Franz von Benda-Beckmann, Keebet von Benda-Beckmann and Melanie G. Wiber. New York: Berghahn Books; Judith Beyer (2016) *The force of custom. Law and the ordering of everyday life in Kyrgyzstan*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

[8] Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, nor Modern?" *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (2007): 601-623.

[9] Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, CA, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

[10] Marvin Harris' -emic/-etic distinction; Headland, Thomas N., Kenneth L. Pike, and Marvin Harris. 1990. Emics and etics: The insider/outsider debate (Frontiers of Anthropology). SAGE Publications Inc: Newbury Park

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[13] Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

[14] Heady and Yalçın-Heckmann, "Implications of Endogamy."

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