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Article

Marriage, Divorce and Mutual Indebtedness

Perspectives from Tajikistan

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Abstract

This article offers an original insight on the gift economy in Tajikistan. As long shown by the literature, ceremonial expenditures sustain social status and convey moral obligations and social order. In this context, we find that marriage breakdown sheds a new light on social cohesion and the sense of indebtedness in Tajik society. In the case studies provided, the material and symbolic meaning of marital breakdown is analysed from the perspective of divorced women. In the context of high ritual expenditure, we ask what are the effects of divorce (and more broadly, demarriage) on women's perceptions of gender and marital roles in a context of economic crisis and mass male migration to Russia. Specifically, we are interested in the language of debt that shapes women's discourses about their former marital bond, and how it disrupts the principles of the gift economy that derive from traditional gender and generational roles. In particular, the notion of debt allows divorced women to condemn their ex-in-laws' failings towards them. The end of the marriage opens the way for the denunciation of broken promises, the expression of unfulfilled expectations and the breaking of marital, gender and collective obligations towards the spouse. While it brings with it a demand for recognition and social justice, it also expresses the contradictory tensions that run through society, its norms and the traditional social roles associated with conjugality.

Keywords

Tajikistan, Central Asia, marriage, divorce, debt, gender relations

In Tajikistan, relations of indebtedness are a daily reality for families and households. This is true in both rural and urban areas, where people buy on credit at the market, the grocery store, and the pharmacy, invest in tontines with rotating

redistribution, contribute to neighbourhood funds (called ‘*mahalla* funds’¹), borrow money from their families rather than from the bank, bring gifts that they hope will be reciprocated at the next occasion, etc. Household debt relations are mostly based on interpersonal relationships, while bank borrowing² is mainly a matter of mortgages or business loans. The relationship of mutual indebtedness, based on reciprocity and a sense of obligation, is a widespread and powerful mode of social organisation in Central Asia (Cleuziou, 2016; 2019; Trevisani, 2016; Waters, 2018; Werner, 1998). Ceremonial exchanges, especially weddings, provide a solid basis for these transactions.

However, in Tajikistan, the increased pressures on ritual expenses, coupled with the rise in divorce rates over the past two decades, have induced a reassessment of these relationships. Ordinary hospitality and ceremonial expenditure related to life events have increased sharply since the early 2000s, due in particular to the enrichment of some sections of the population and access to new liquid assets, mainly as a result of migration to Russia. Temporary geographical migration, linked to expectations of social mobility, is mainly driven by men, who transfer money to their family in Tajikistan (reaching about 30% of the country’s GDP) (Bakozoda and al. 2019). In addition, the rise of nationalism and identity claims on the one hand (Roche and Hohman 2011), together with urbanisation and the spread of mass consumption models on the other (Trevisani 2016), have increased the pressure on household spending. Other factors have played in the opposite direction, such as the simultaneous increasing number of separations in Tajikistani society – also partly induced by long-term migration – which introduces an element of uncertainty and heightened risk regarding the material and social investment that these ritual expenditures represent.³ Migrations have also led to a loosening of social control based on territorial anchorage (residential proximity, marital endogamy, etc.) (Kasymova 2007). Moreover, national regulations have been at play: supposedly concerned with avoiding the risks of over-indebtedness and the growing financial insecurity of families, the Tajikistani authorities have adopted regulations (in 2007 and 2017) aimed at reducing the volume of ceremonial expenses, through a tight control of the celebration formats (Jumhurii Tojikiston (Republic of Tajikistan) 2007; Roche, Hohmann 2011; Borisova 2020).

¹ A *mahalla* is a Central Asian institution that represents an administrative unit on a neighbourhood scale, historically organized around a mosque, and administered by a volunteer chief who is the link between the inhabitants and the local authorities, particularly regarding practical concerns (water, electricity, local taxes or garbage management) but also social matters (permits to celebrate weddings, circumcisions, etc.) A *mahalla*’s vitality generally depends on its leader, as is the case for collecting voluntary financial donations to help the poor or for necessary rebuilding.

² Bank loans are rare for a variety of reasons: very high interest rates, social and political control of credit, lack of trust, etc.

³ The increase in the number of divorces/separations in Tajikistani society is difficult to measure accurately as fewer and fewer marriages are registered with the civil registry (marriages that are solely religious).

These ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ changes in ritual life in Central Asia (Trevisani, 2016) do not generate binaries such as traditional weddings as opposed to modern ones, social stability vs. change, or communal life vs. individualism. They are rather the product of both macro-social and political trends on the one hand, and micro-shifts in demographic, societal, marital structures, and forms of mobility on the other. These factors generate tensions and contradictions at the heart of ritual ceremonies, which increasingly may result in a break-up in the following months or years. So, how do people and women in particular react to and reflect on the contradictions raised by the communal expectations of mutual indebtedness on the one hand, and the increasing number of ruptures brought on by divorce on the other?

This article offers an original answer to this question by examining the meanings given to ceremonial exchanges and expected gender roles associated with them, in specific contexts: during ordinary and festive hospitality on the one hand, before and after break-ups on the other. We look at how the language of debt arises from misunderstanding and discontent, thus providing a renewed moral assessment of the relations between the partners of exchange.

In order to analyse the moral appraisal reflected in the language of debt, this article moves away from the perspective of the spheres of exchange to adopt a broader view of debt that may allow debt and gift to coexist. Indeed, classical economic anthropology considers gifts on the one hand, and debt and credit on the other, as belonging to two opposing fields of exchange. The former to non-market relations in which what is given cannot be dissociated from the exchange relations involved and the later to market relations in which it can and goods can be transferred independently of who receives them, subject to a return (Dufy and Weber 2007; Dufy 2007).⁴ In this conception, the first is part of the private, intimate sphere of interpersonal relations and is devoid of calculation, whereas the second integrates the transaction into the order of calculative rationality, profit, or relational indifference. In this way, exchange generates autonomy, whereas gifts create dependence (Gregory 1982). This approach was challenged by the New Economic Sociology, in particular by Viviana Zelizer, who criticises the theory of spheres of exchange as being one of ‘hostile worlds’ describing ‘nothing but...’: ‘nothing but the market’ or ‘nothing but the gift economy’ (Zelizer 2005). In line with Zelizer’s work, we show that these two poles are part of a continuum, since from gift can arise debt. Based on this statement, our paper shows that in the context of a gift economy such as in Tajikistan, the difference between gift, exchange and debt may be a moral one rather than a material/legal one and may evolve over time. Beyond that, our contribution proposes to take up a further step by demonstrating that in this context, debt becomes a discourse on relationships that carries a criticism of the social order.

⁴ These goods are produced specifically to be traded; they have no use value. The individuals involved are independent: the exchange occurs without the need for any other social relationship than the one at work within the exchange itself (Testart 2007, 725).

This study is based on fieldwork carried out since 2011 in Tajikistan, both in the capital, Dushanbe, and in the rural regions of Darvoz and the Rasht Valley. Our material consists of approximately fifty interviews, conducted mainly with women, married or divorced. We also observed some twenty ceremonies and records of matrimonial exchanges whenever possible. Our material compares forms of exchange and discourses on these transactions analysed over time, sometimes retrospectively and as part of marital and family trajectories. Its originality lies in the fact that it is based on moments of rupture in the life cycle which cast a new light on the moral value given to gifts and debts. More specifically, it mobilises the discourses on ritual exchanges of married and demarried women.

We begin by analysing how gift exchanges and the sense of obligation and indebtedness generate cohesion as well as a strong form of social control. The second part of the paper finds that ambiguity is at the heart of ceremonial rituals: gestures of generosity can be interpreted in radically different ways depending on the relational contexts involved. These examples show how ceremonial spending mobilises moral frameworks, as well as phenomena of reputation and distinction. Lastly, we discuss how individuals, and in particular women in situations of divorce or separation, sometimes use the vocabulary of debt to talk about relationships. We show that debt appears as a form of retrospective discourse and that it can arise from an attempt to gain further recognition of one's contribution to family reproduction.

Gift and Debt

Cohesion and Social Control in Central Asia

Hospitality, both ordinary and festive, is a central value in Tajikistan. The succession of transfers that this hospitality involves creates certain expectations of counter-transfers: the gift and counter-gift economy organises the forms of sociability in the country. In many ways, it illustrates what Mauss (2007 [1925]) has described as the three obligations linked to gift-giving, i.e., giving, accepting, and returning. These obligations diffuse through extended kinship circles as well as neighbouring and friendship networks. Its cost is often accepted because it belongs to a field of sociability that is expected and desired, and which is more or less voluntarily integrated.⁵ It ensures forms of social control by generating preventive anxiety that anticipates the risk of not reciprocating: returning a gift aims to avoid any damage to the person's reputation (Beyer 2016). This widespread gift economy which connects things given, people to people, and people to gifts is aptly described in economic anthropology (Dufy and Weber, 2007). However, it takes on different material forms that are specific to Tajikistan and Central Asia in general (Werner 1998; Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998; Abashin 1999; Roche and

⁵ Soviet ethnography provides a large number of descriptions of ritual exchange and family transformation. On Tajikistan, see among others Kislyakov 1959; Kislyakov and Pisarchik 1970; Monogarova and Mukhiddinov 1992; Monogarova 1992.

Hohmann 2011; Ilkhamov 2013; Gudeman and Hann 2015; Beyer 2016; Trevisani 2016; Hardenberg 2017; Cleuziou 2019).⁶

In Tajikistan, the circulation of basins (*karson*) carried out by women when they are invited to each other's homes for events of varying importance is at the heart of these reciprocating practices. A guest goes to her hostess' house with X amount of food (bread, samboussa, chocolates, etc.), or even gifts (head scarves, pieces of cloth). In an adjacent room, and out of sight, the hostess replaces the entire contents of the basins she has received following a logic of lower proportionality (a little less bread, a little fewer gifts, etc.) but which also always reflects both the quality of the goods received and the nature of the relationship with the guest. The exercise is a balancing act creating reciprocal and asymmetrical obligations, as part of a wider system of behavioural expectations, where inappropriate behaviour can lead to forms of shame for both men and women, although in different ways (Tett 1996; Harris 2004). Because she spends the most, the hostess creates obligations through her invitation (a kind of 'gift-credit' as articulated by Gregory in 1980). These are partially compensated for by the gifts offered by her female guests. However, the women who are invited also consider that they give more than they receive: their basins, which are distributed to them as they leave, are only returned with less than the gifts they initially brought. These exchanges thus seem to take place on slightly different but complementary levels: the number of invitations on the one hand, and the amount of assistance on the other. Therefore, although not necessarily a debt (*qarz*), the feeling of obligation generated by these transfers is very clear: a hostess will expect a return invitation, the guests will expect their hostess to bring a basin equal to the one they themselves brought. 'It depends on people's conscience' (*ba vijdoni inson bovasta ast*) we were told. The obligation is unspoken, but both partners in the exchange expect a return transfer related to the nature of the initial gift. In any case, the point is to maintain a situation of 'alternating disequilibrium' (Strathern 1971, 11) which ensures the preservation and renewal of social ties.⁷

In Tajikistan, within the framework of sociability structured around hospitality (festive meals called *ma'raka*, *gap*, *tashkili*, etc.), these transfers of benefits are an area of competence that is specific to women and which both mark and buttress social relations. Most often, this kind of reciprocity involves accumulating fabrics, scarves, and gifts in chests (*sandug*) so that there is always enough to compensate guests or gifts to put in basins, but can also be amassed in preparation for a wedding trousseau. When these sociabilities involve women who are close (immediate family or intimate friends), these basins are often seen as a way of helping (*kumak kardan*) in the organisation of the meal. A woman who brings

⁶ See also the difference between exchange, which implies an equivalence between "autonomous" goods, and sharing, which implies the performance of a group identity between the members involved, as proposed by Bechtold about the ritual economy in Kyrgyzstan (Bechtold 2017, 40).

⁷ This term was coined by Andrew Strathern to describe the moka exchange system found in Papua New Guinea. See *The Rope of Moka. Big men and Ceremonial exchange in Mount Hagen, New Guinea* (1971).

nothing may be excused in exceptional cases. On the other hand, coming empty-handed is unthinkable beyond the family circle, with neighbours who are less close, or with one's professional network. If a woman is invited but cannot bring a basin, because of a lack of money for instance, she will simply not attend the event in question. This is a reminder that this type of sociability based on asymmetrical exchanges between guests and hostesses always requires a minimum amount of resources – the poorest women do not have the means to join these networks. In this way, material transfers include as well as exclude from sociability.

The celebrations (*tu*) of marriages and circumcisions, as well as burial and remembrance ceremonies, also stage and act out these exchanges, but on a larger scale: the basins are larger, more numerous, and more lavish; the gifts are more imposing; the festivities are more spectacular. Moreover, on these occasions, parents do not hesitate to go into debt to their own family in order to ensure that the party lives up to expectations. These debt relationships generate constant flows, circulations that place individuals in interdependence over shorter or longer periods of time. In the end, one becomes indebted to one's family in order to become indebted to one's neighbours. In this way, rituals of sociability can generate two types of debt: an implicit but firm social accountability and a material indebtedness that support the wider reproduction of social ties, as shown in the following example.

When Mahbuba married off her daughter in Dushanbe in June 2013, as a widow without a husband to support her, she spent a total of almost US\$10,000. This amount included purchases made ahead of time (sometimes several years before) and some made several months after the wedding for the dowry goods (*ruzgor, mol*), but also expenses for the ceremony itself which took place in several stages as is traditional. As she did not have enough savings, she borrowed US\$900 from a co-worker whom she trusts, and US\$300 from her niece whose husband earns a good living. She then received gifts in kind and money from her brothers, who helped with the dowry (about US\$600). She also received US\$2,500 from her daughter's husband's family (an expected transfer usually referred to as a *qalin* or the 'bride price'⁸) to help with the preparations – money with which she bought furniture for her daughter's room. She received many small sums of money and basins full of food from her guests during the various meals that marked the festivities. This helped her to provide food for the feast and make the wedding all the more lavish (these were constant inflows and outflows that made it very difficult to assess the amount of 'help' provided). Last but not least, Mahbuba received help from five female relatives who spent a week in her home, including during the ceremonies, and who worked full time on the daily household economy as well as on preparing the celebration. And during the festivities, young men from the family and close neighbourhood also helped with serving the food and handling heavy loads.

⁸ The bride price is typically a non-market exchange where the initial transfer (the bride price itself) calls for a counterpart – the bride. In case the betrothal should be broken, the groom's family can legitimately in the eyes of society demand that the bride price be returned. We will see below that this is not the case of a dowry.

This example is only one of many festive events involving multiple different transfers. Financial debts first: Mahbuba will repay the sums of US\$900 and US\$300 to her work colleague and niece a few months after the wedding, and without interest. The gifts she received from her brothers are considered to be help (*kumak*), and are the expected gifts from maternal uncles to their niece – especially as the girl has lost her father (similarly, Mahbuba is expected to contribute to the weddings of her brothers' children). The transfers associated with ordinary or festive hospitality, such as basins of food or small sums of money contributed by the guests, are signs of the hostess's indebtedness to her guests, but also of the guests' indebtedness to their hostess, as we shall further explore. The bride price (*galin*) – a transfer made by the groom's parents to Mahbuba – is transformed into goods in kind, and greatly increased to now form the dowry.⁹ These matrimonial benefits are essential in order for the marriage to take place and create or renew a strong relationship of interdependence between the two families who are now allied through the marriage of their children (a relationship referred to as *qudo*). Finally, material help (and wise counsel) from extended family members is expected in this setting, especially from those closest to the family and from young people. Mahbuba will nevertheless thank them by offering clothes (dresses, scarves, shirts) or care products (shampoo, soaps, combs, etc.) (see also Cleuziou 2019).

A distinction is made between financial debts – referred to as *qarz* – and material or moral obligations, which can occasionally be referred to with the same word in Tajik. In fact, *qarz* means debt, duty, and credit. The person who is in debt is called a *qarzidor*, which also means 'to be obliged to.' Borrowing is called *qarz giriftan* ('to take on a debt/credit') while lending is called *qarz dodan* ('to give a debt/credit'). The same term is thus used to designate the interdependent relationship generated by a transfer (which in principle calls for a counter-transfer), with the verb being used to designate its direction. However, the fact that the same term may occasionally be used for different types of transfer does not mean that the latter hold the same status. Indeed, while all of them create a sense of obligation, only the financial debt can be completely erased after repayment. The other transfers, in the shape of gifts, create obligations and expectations that may be quantifiable ('I worked so many days at X's wedding', 'I brought a gift of such and such value') but which require returns of the same order (days of work, a wedding gift of the same order of magnitude, etc.), and which will always ideally be reciprocated in excess, thus generating alternating obligations. These types of transfer are therefore subject to calculations, recollections, and private accounting

⁹ On the recent development of dowry in the region, see Cleuziou 2019.

that set them apart from pure acts of giving.¹⁰ Unlike Kyrgyzstan (Bechtold 2017) or Uzbekistan (Petric 2004), however, where the keeping of account books can track household debt relationships, Tajikistan does not – or only very occasionally – offer these written resources. Where they do exist, the account books are short-lived and serve mainly to ensure that, at a large party, guests leave with basins filled in proportion to what they brought in the first place. But most of the time they are thrown away at the end of the day and do not serve to trace the debt over time, to the next event for example.

The ritual economy of giving in Tajikistan highlights a strong intertwining of gift and debt, of social accountability and forms of material and financial indebtedness, drawing porous boundaries and deploying a multiplicity of forms of giving and types of debt. The implicit expectations of return are shared, but they remain without any formal trace and leave room for interpretation. In the end, only the financial debt (the one Mahbuba has explicitly contracted with her work colleague and niece) evades the freedom of return.

Gifts, Reputation, Distinction

Whether or not they are written down in notebooks, whether the memory is precise or approximate, the desire to give gifts that are proportionate to the event, to the status of the recipients and to the relationship that one has (or wishes to have) with them remains a constant preoccupation, particularly for the women in charge. This is because the logic behind the gift economy in Tajikistan is closely linked to that of favours, services, and information. The gift economy is part of a wider system of maintaining weak ties and networks of sociability as broad as possible. Here, the pivotal role of individual and family reputations must be emphasised: the gift economy is organised on the basis of the information and knowledge that people have about each other. Reputation is therefore a resource that is essential for being included in these circulations (alongside the economic resources needed to take part in them), and these circulations feed back into it (Beyer 2016; Cleuziou 2019). This means that tracking women's involvement in these forms of debt-bearing reciprocity provides a geography of a network of relationships (a neighbourhood, a village, ties between rural and urban life), which can be perpetuated, interrupted or ruptured by the vagaries of life trajectories. Failure to comply with these reciprocity logics – specifically, never accepting or returning invitations – can lead to criticism that circulates from one family to

¹⁰ The debate on pure unilateral or non-returnable giving is broad and divides anthropologists. Some consider pure giving to be extremely rare (Douglas 1990); the most disconnected forms of return (organ donation in an anonymous system as is the case in France, anonymous giving or prayer in reality generating forms of charity or feelings of self-awareness that distance them from unrequited generosity). Mary Douglas presents the English translation of *The Gift* with a recontextualization of Mauss' work. She states that 'there is no such thing as a free gift' and that giving creates solidarity (Douglas 1990). For the author, this work is to be placed in the context of the creation of the social security system in post-war France and is a manifesto against British individualism and the liberalism of classical political economy (Douglas 1990). Others, on the contrary, define pure giving as characteristic of modern societies (Hénaff 2002). See also Hann 2006 for a review.

another. These negative counterparts can be detrimental in a context where reputation is a key element of social and relational capital.

The anecdote involving Muslima, who lives in the country's capital, illustrates the close ties between inclusion in the system of exchange, reputation, and the risk of negative counterpart. She was set to marry her daughter to her cousin's son, but the cousin's family indirectly refused the marriage by betrothing the son to another young woman from the same region. Although the reason was never mentioned publicly, it was stated to me on several occasions: Muslima is not a welcoming or generous hostess. 'She has money but never spends it on her friends, she is not agreeable. Nobody wants to have her as a family-in-law (*qudo*).' The humiliation was blatant: the marriage between the young people had been planned, even 'expected' for several years. In other words, refusing to engage in these gift/counter-gift transfers, and refusing to accept the always asymmetrical reciprocal relationship, also means refusing the rules of propriety and dependence. Not surprisingly, the sanctions – whose effectiveness remains proportional to the social capital of those who seek to apply them – focus primarily on reputation. We see its role in the planning of marriages and how this can be affected by a bad reputation.

Muslima's case brings to light the sometimes (extremely) constraining nature of gifts, the 'obligation to give back' referred to by Mauss: when a disagreement or dispute arises, the fiction of the disinterested gift (to use another Maussian expression) appears to break down. There is no longer any talk of a gift (*tuhfa*) or help (*kumak*). The 'silent and invisible (or "misrecognized")' aspect of the gift contract comes into focus (Peebles 2010, 229). Thus, when the discourse on debt appears in a social universe in which the gift is central, it tends to make the differences between gift and commodities more relative,¹¹ and even more so between systems of exchange such as gift/counter-gift or credit/debt.

The ordering of the social through gift-giving further generates several types of difficulties for the individuals and families involved. The analytical difficulty of separating the two is reflected in the blurring that exists in their practices. Indeed, academic literature on the subject has highlighted the sometimes very high cost of this type of gift, potentially linked to entrapping clientelistic logics (Abashin 1999; Ismailbekova 2005 and 2017; Roche and Hohmann 2011; Borisova 2020), first in a context of state disintegration following the collapse of the USSR (see Humphrey 2002; Werner 1997), and then in one in which the increase in income from migration seems to have contributed to an even higher demand for spending (Trevisani 2016). Judith Beyer, in her work on Kyrgyzstan, has described the anxiety of failing in one's duties, especially counter-transfers, and of being punished for it, as shame-anxiety: individuals act preventively out of fear of what 'one' might say about them (Beyer 2016). From a perspective such as ours, which

¹¹ As stated by Godelier, the same objects may be transferred as gifts or as commodities, depending on the social context of the exchange. One cannot infer the type of transfer from the nature of the object transferred.

is primarily concerned with exchange, the term debt-anxiety can be used to describe what keeps individuals in this system of asymmetrical interdependence: the anxiety of a poorly alternated obligation that must be reversed (literally) at all costs.¹² In the context of a corrupt state, inefficient public services and increased access to cash from migration earnings, forms of mutual dependency via the transfers of goods, whether reciprocated or not, are as much a potential resource as they are a powerful mode of social pressure, based on the fundamental uncertainty linked to the idea of a ‘public’ opinion (of oneself and of one’s family). Fear that an inadequate or too small counter-transfer could damage their reputation creates a debt anxiety that pushes individuals to uphold this system of exchange, and even to fuel the inflation that has characterised it since the early 2000s¹³ – we will come back to this below with the issue of the marriage dowry.

Indeed, in Tajikistan as elsewhere where it is prevalent, the gift economy organises both asymmetrical reciprocity and forms of distinction, hierarchy, and social prestige, and can result in both recognition and humiliation. Two vignettes help illustrate this.

The first is a wedding party in 2013 organised by the man who was referred to as ‘the Prosecutor’ in a district of Dushanbe (he actually worked in the prosecutor’s office). To celebrate his daughter’s wedding, he invited three musical groups who were all well-known on the local and national scene. The party went well beyond the scope of a private celebration as stipulated by the 2007 and 2017 decrees already mentioned above. The entire neighbourhood – and beyond, hundreds of people – were able to attend all or part of the event. The proceedings vastly exceeded the usual framework of the customary exchanges of basins (*karson*): while some of the guests had followed the tradition, others – the guests who were ‘passing through’, the onlookers from the neighbourhood – brought nothing. However, it was perfectly possible for them to attend the party and dance with the rest of the crowd. In this case, the party’s magnitude obviously went far beyond renewing the Prosecutor’s relationship with his neighbours (or his wife’s with her neighbours): the lavishness of this displayed generosity went a long way towards bolstering his reputation as a ‘good person’ (*mardi narghiz*). The crowd of uninvited guests who gathered at his home attested to this. This meant that relationships of obligation did not exist with all the guests, but only with some of them. Mahbuba, who attended the party with me but was not a formal guest, did not feel indebted to the Prosecutor (or, again more accurately, to his wife), and he would not expect anything from her in terms of a return invitation, even though she ate and danced at his house. A contribution would have far exceeded her means anyway: it was understood that not everyone would be in debt from this celebration. The Prosecutor’s wealth allows him to offer gifts without the expectation of a counter-

¹² Strathern (1971) speaks of ‘alternating disequilibrium.’

¹³ In other cases, families’ anxiety may be based on whether or not the wedding is in line keeping with tradition (for more on this point, see Trevisani 2016 and Cleuziou 2019).

gift,¹⁴ without this necessarily creating a relationship of interpersonal obligation. The lavish spending is the price he pays to maintain the social prestige that comes with his professional status. In this situation, the fact of temporarily (for the duration of the party) and partially (with some of the guests) withdrawing from the system of giving/counter-giving (and mutual indebtedness) is a way of distinguishing oneself, of rising to the top of the social ladder.¹⁵

However, the quantity of gifts is not the only criterion for understanding how social distinctions are played out within this gift economy: the status of the partners in the exchange is also fundamental. For instance, the generosity that was displayed by Mukhabbat's neighbour had the opposite effect to that of the Prosecutor and was even counterproductive, as we will show below. Mukhabbat, a 40-year-old resident of a modest neighbourhood of apartment buildings on the outskirts of Dushanbe, says she and other neighbours were invited by a woman who had recently moved in and wanted to meet. Mukhabbat, as is customary, brought a basin of bread, pastries and a box of chocolates. But she didn't really like the way the meal unfolded. According to her, the neighbour did 'too much.' Everything on the table was very expensive, she wore all her gold jewellery on her fingers, and she insisted that the guests eat more and taste everything because 'everything was very good and very expensive' (sic Mukhabbat). Mukhabbat experienced this as humiliation: 'She knows that we know the price of the chocolates and candies on the table [and that we cannot afford to buy them in such quantities]'. The reaction is one of denigration – 'she is a *qishloki* ('villager' in the negative sense), but she thinks she is rich.' She lacks manners and tact. The immediate penalty will be damage to the newcomer's reputation, and Mukhabbat is not shy about sharing her opinions with her neighbours. Unlike the Prosecutor's party, the displayed generosity does not 'take', it seems too fake, inappropriate, out of step with the reality of the social position of the hostess. With this displayed generosity, the neighbour seeks to set herself apart, to place herself 'above' Mukhabbat despite the fact that the gap in status does not seem at all as obvious as in the case of the Prosecutor. And Mukhabbat feels humiliated but not really indebted: by doing too much, her neighbour has not started a positive reciprocal relationship, but neither has she generated a favourable appreciation of her person.

The mechanisms of giving and counter-giving can therefore only be understood in light of the status of the people involved in the exchange and of the intentionality

¹⁴ Sahlins called this 'generalized reciprocity' (Sahlins 1965, 193).

¹⁵ For the wealthiest families, distinction is achieved through a demonstration of generosity that adds to the system of asymmetrical reciprocity; rising above the system, 'from above' secures the social gap between oneself and others. The generosity displayed in the absence of any form of reciprocity fuels hierarchies and validates social positions within the gift economy. On the other side of the social ladder, for the poorest families, being outside the gift system due to a lack of resources leads to isolation and indifference. In between, the 'average' families tend to organize significant lavish ceremonies to avoid the stigma associated to the poor. The latter work as a preventive and distancing mechanism from poverty.

of the relationship they are entering into. In this respect, asymmetrical reciprocity is not limited to the transfer of objects, gifts or goods, but must be understood in the context of a broader system of obligations. For although it is always the same things that are given – food, standardised gifts (pieces of cloth, clothes, chocolates, dishes, scarves) – the type of relationship that is created varies according to the status and objectives of the parties involved. The mechanisms of gift and counter-gift, of invitations and returning (or not) invitations, contribute to nourishing different kinds of social relations, which are not mutually exclusive. There are relations of reciprocity and obligation, in which the aim is to perpetuate the relationship in question (through a continually renewed double expectation) but also relations of distinction, mechanisms of social distancing – although the example of Mukhabbat’s neighbour shows that there may be some question as to the success of this process. In all cases, the forms of mutual indebtedness mentioned in the first part of this paper are part of a social organisation that relies more broadly on forms of mutual dependence, as illustrated in the second part, whether these generate an expectation of counter-transfers (as in the matrimonial exchanges between in-laws) or not (as in the case of the Prosecutor’s party). In the following developments, we base our analysis upon divorce narratives in order to highlight how the vocabulary of debt emerges from unfulfilled expectations and the rupture of mutual dependence.

From the Daughter-in-law (*kelin*) to the Demarried Woman Debt as a Critical Discourse

The fiction of giving, gifting, and helping can be shattered when the expected counter-gift does not materialise – this was the reason behind the social sanction against Muslima and, in turn, her daughter. Her reputed lack of generosity (in this case, her supposedly low level of contribution to the exchange of gifts within the extended family) was detrimental to their marriage plans. Disagreements, even disputes, reveal the contractual aspect of the gift – that is, its inclusion in a broader system of obligations, and even more so its binding and potentially coercive aspect. It is true that these sanctions do not stem from a legal framework, but they are nevertheless effective in adjusting social relations.

In this regard, it is important to note that the greater the transfers involved, the greater the risks in the event of a ‘dysfunction.’ But the extent of the risk is also shrouded in uncertainty: what will happen if the transfer is not reciprocated? What if it is considered too weak? These questions are particularly worrying around weddings (which involve considerable transfers¹⁶), and are often discussed in the family of a young woman who is getting married and has to bring a dowry into her new home. The dowry epitomises the uncertainty that surrounds both the role of marital benefits and the future relationship with both the husband and the

¹⁶ According to the surveys on wedding costs conducted by the author between 2012 and 2015, families used to spend between US\$2,000 and US\$10,000 to celebrate the marriage of one of their children (Cleuziou 2016). It should be noted that the average monthly wage during the same period was approximately US\$150.

in-laws. Indeed, the dowry is never requested or negotiated, its amount is never specified, yet it is expected. Therefore, a dowry that is too small or too large (possibly interpreted as a sign of contempt or social haughtiness) poses a risk of the bride being mistreated.¹⁷

On the other hand, a ‘proper’ dowry does not guarantee that she will be treated well either. Parents of young women are well aware of the possible correlation between the dowry and the treatment their daughter will receive when they prepare it. The gift of the dowry must indeed be commensurate with the status of the members of the household, their relationship with each other, and the expectations of the time – the ‘air du temps.’ But when the marriage breaks down, the dowry then conceived as a gift is reinterpreted in light of the separation. The dowry raised expectations of a counter-gift over a long period of time: the assurance of a stable and prosperous home for the young woman.¹⁸ Today, this temporality is necessarily disrupted by the previously mentioned increase in separations, and it is striking to hear a large number of women who are demarried¹⁹ develop a discourse on their relations with their in-laws that uses the vocabulary of debt (*qarz*). Moreover, the destitution suffered by many of them reinforces their sense of injustice. The word debt is used here to describe a promise (of a gift) that has not been kept. But what exactly is this debt about?

A home separate from the in-laws, economic security, and social status are all elements of compensation expected by the young woman (and her family) over the course of her marriage: they are expected as a counterpart to her service within the household (or even subservience) (see also Turaeva 2017). Indeed, most of the time, women who are separated (voluntarily or not) have to move out of their place of residence which, most often, belongs to their husband. They must return to their parents’ or another family member’s home or find an apartment. The grievances of separated women can also be focused on services that have not been repaid, unpaid alimony, etc.²⁰ Many of them mentioned that they had worked for their in-laws for free, without pay, and were therefore left without any material or financial resources after their separation, despite years of effort and hard work.

¹⁷ It should be noted here that the status of ‘wife givers’, as well as that of ‘gift makers’, do not confer any particular superiority or prestige: on the contrary, in the context of matrimonial exchanges in Tajikistan, the family of the young man enjoys an established ritual superiority.

¹⁸ The status of daughter-in-law (*kelin*) is not an enviable one, at the bottom of the social ladder as it is so fraught with difficulties: a daughter-in-law must do all the domestic chores in her new home and agree to obey all the members of the household without fail. The combined effect of time and the children she brings into the world will help to gradually improve her situation, until she first acquires a separate house, and then when her children marry and she in turn becomes a mother-in-law. Many women consider that patience, obedience and hard work within a family-in-law are rewarded by the acquisition of a home of their own.

¹⁹ The adjective ‘demarried’ or the noun ‘demarriage’ is intended to include all situations of marital separation regardless of their civil and/or legal status (divorce, Islamic repudiation, de facto abandonment, etc.).

²⁰ For a comparison with Western cases of divorce narratives, see Walzer and Oles 2003.

These women express a quantification of domestic labour that is otherwise almost never mentioned, as it is considered natural for young brides to carry out this type of work. The burdens tied to a familial and social role (that of a daughter-in-law, *kelin*) are reinterpreted in terms of uncompensated labour (*kor*) – even exploitation (*kelin khizmatgor ast*: ‘a daughter-in-law is a servant’) – a claim that highlights the economic-sexual exchange²¹ at work and that describes well the nature of the exchanges organised between men and women (Tabet 2004).

In addition to these unpaid domestic services, the content of the dowry itself is a major topic of discussion. Indeed, it is quite rare for a woman to be able to reclaim what she brought with her at the time of her marriage – and when she does, it is usually her clothes and gold jewellery, but rarely the rest. And yet, the dowry is today a very significant cost for the families of young women: Mahbuba’s daughter’s dowry, mentioned above, accounted for two-thirds of the total expenses incurred. The dowry consists of the bride’s trousseau (clothes, jewellery), household appliances (oven, refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, blender, etc.) and furniture (television, sofa, wardrobe, bed, etc.), as well as a number of goods whose value is often unrelated to their use: dozens of tea sets, pots and pans, blankets, mattresses, pillows, slippers, and cosmetics (shampoos, combs, soaps, make-up). These numbers serve in fact to express abundance rather than real need.

When a woman is evicted from her home (or, more accurately, from her husband’s or his parents’ house), repudiated, divorced, or the domestic violence she faces on a daily basis causes her to flee, the dowry remains.

‘With everything I brought, I didn’t get anything back!’

‘When I went to get my chests (*sandug*) my mother-in-law had taken half of what was in it.’

‘I left and left everything. I thought about going back but I didn’t have the courage.’

‘After all I did for them, and I got nothing in return.’

‘Of course it’s mine, but how can I get it back? It’s all in their house.’

²¹ “In an overwhelming majority of these relations [between women and men, which go from prostitution to marriage], the exchange is made in a specific direction: the women provide a service or a benefit, which varies in nature or in length, but which includes sexual use or refers to sexuality; the men provide a compensation or remuneration of varying importance and nature, but which is always linked to the possibility of sexual use by the woman, to her sexual availability.” (Tabet 2004, 8, original in French).

'I wanted to get my daughter's dowry back, but my in-laws told me that for a few mattresses and blankets, I wasn't going to reclaim them when supposedly I have money.'

Thus, as a result of the separation, the 'magic' (as Mauss might say) of the marriage and of the gifts made in order to bring it about vanishes – in particular the illusion that the gifts were free to give and yet under constraint. The mutual obligation that marriage creates is here retrospectively converted into a credit/debt relationship – both following each other over time in the order of discourse and values, although the nature of the transfers has not changed.

In the eyes of these women, since the expected counter-gift never materialised, recovering the dowry becomes legitimate.²² Using the notion of debt (*qarz*) retrospectively within a system that, in the present, is experienced as a gift/counter-gift exchange under the authority of tradition (see Cleuziou 2019) expresses the injustice felt as a result of the separation (which most say they are victims of and not responsible for, so undesirable is the position of a single woman). The 'shared expectations about morality' (Light 2015, 55) are undermined and quantifying the services and goods that were provided justifies a moral evaluation which considers the young man's family as being in debt – this is how the gift is reclassified as a debt. However, with no real coercive means to be 'repaid', most of them speak here of a debt that they know they can never enforce, the guarantee of a life ordered by traditional gender relations in which they entered with marriage, and, to a lesser extent, the goods transferred in the dowry.

For their part, the husband's family most often considers that the separation is the result of the young woman's fault, her misbehaviour, or her failure to fulfil her duties as a daughter-in-law (*kelin*), wife (*zavja*) or mother (*modar*).²³ By this logic, she cannot expect to get a home of her own or stay in the household. Furthermore, the husband's family generally considers the assets brought by the daughter-in-law as their own: the dowry is a wedding gift intended for them and does not belong to the young woman. The latter can, however, reclaim her clothes and jewellery, which are her own property. The ownership dispute usually favours the husband's family who has a major advantage in the argument: the dowry is materially in their home, which is why they actually keep it most of the time.

In the end, the debt describes both the lack of counter-transfer (which is generally inscribed in the long term such as a house of one's own, etc.) as well as the ties, the broken relationships. When the expectation of the counter-gift is preserved, one does not speak of debt: one waits for the return, the next opportunity, the right moment. But the separation radicalises the relationships: ending this expectation

²² The duration of the marriage is often inversely proportional to the girl's family's chances of recovering the dowry.

²³ On the different forms of justification and cross-accusation at the time of separation, see Cleuziou 2016.

creates a debt. The obligation of reciprocity is transformed into a quantification. Graeber (2011) emphasised the fact that debt differs from gift by its measurability and the possibility of quantifying it, which gives the creditor the possibility of enforcing it. The example of Tajikistan shows that debt can also be a way of defining broken relationships, through attempts at measurability or quantification, even when these seem impossible (in this case, the economic-sexual exchange). This attempt to quantify family and marital relationships, as well as a variety of services rendered over a more or less long period of time (from a few months to several years) also reflects the perception that families and young women have of the dowry as an insurance mechanism.²⁴ As we have already seen, the idea that it might influence the young woman's well-being in her new home supports this view. The transfer of identical goods, in large quantities, is also a transfer of values calibrated on the nature of the relationships and the assumptions made about them, rather than on the use value of the goods in question. Finally, the debt relationship that it generates in retrospect is an additional indicator. However, like all insurance, it is contracted in the hope of an effectiveness that is not guaranteed.²⁵

The terminology of debt used by demarried women also carries a critical discourse. To be sure, the quantification of domestic service, the use of terms such as 'exploitation' (*istimor bud*), 'servant' (*man khizmatgor budam*), etc., are all indicators of a critical view of the relationship between men and women as well as between in-laws and daughter-in-law in Tajikistani society. In our opinion, this critical discourse also reveals a claim for both individual and social recognition. Indeed, without a house, often without a job, without status, demarried women find themselves in a state of material and financial loss as well as in a symbolic and status-related deprivation that affects them violently. How can they assert their existence outside of traditional gender roles?

In a society where marriage is the main vehicle for personal and social accomplishment, but where separated men and women bear unequal consequences, the discourse of demarried women on debt is closely linked to a critical assessment of women's situation in the country. This assessment may be described as a struggle for recognition as it has been shown in other contexts (Honneth 1992). In Tajikistan, the expectations (and quest) for recognition that are played out in these matrimonial exchanges are all the more vivid when, in the event of separation, a woman is deprived of what she gave (and gave herself) for

²⁴ In Tajikistan, the role of donations as insurance has been analysed in other contexts, particularly in the health sector, where they can function as an insurance benefit: bribes paid by families are used in the hope of securing better treatment for a loved one's medical care in an underfunded and disorganized health system (Pellet 2018).

²⁵ 'People' know that a small dowry is likely to adversely affect the living conditions of the young woman in the home of her in-laws, who may make life difficult for her. By offering an abundant dowry, even if partially disconnected from its use value, the families of young girls also hope that their daughter will be treated well, and if possible that the marriage will last. The effectiveness of the process, however, is not obvious: dowries have risen sharply, but so have separations. The actual durability of the marital relationship is therefore not necessarily related to the dowry.

the first place: the (existential) assurance of a sheltered life, allowing for locally desired and desirable forms of personal and social fulfilment. Confronted with a glaring inequality in the face of the laws and customs that still powerfully frame life paths, the language of debt turns their domestic tasks into work that calls for retribution (if not remuneration). Women frequently highlight their economic but unpaid role within the household through discourses that emphasise the difficulties associated with the status of daughter-in-law (*kelin*). However, it is not yet clear whether the laws that officially provide for women to be financially supported by their ex-husbands (through alimony) will one day be enforced effectively.²⁶

The divergences in the material and moral evaluation of the transfers involved in both marriages and separations, and of the very meaning attributed to the notion of debt, are so many indications of the porous boundaries between the spheres of exchange and of gift. They also reflect a conception of social relations that values interdependence and reciprocity on the one hand, and a more individualistic one that values autonomy on the other: ‘the two are implicated in each other’s constitution in a manner that means that distinguishing between the two is a matter of moral evaluation that is carried out from specific and conflicting social perspectives’ (Martin 2012, 484). Women’s critiques stem from a conservative vision of marriage, whereby women depend upon their family-in-law to reach existential security and valuable status (that of mother-in-law). When divorced women use the language of debt to demand compensation, they point to the breakdown – of which they are the primary victims – of the gender and family relations traditionally expected in marriage. This situation generates a new retrospective look on gender roles: instead of a perspective in which women’s domestic activities are taken for granted, women’s narratives demand an accounting of their contributions to family reproduction. Eventually, beyond this demand for recognition, marital break-ups are an opportunity to reflect on forms of individual fulfilment, and to rethink gender roles and family relations more generally.

Conclusion

The variety of types of ‘mutual indebtedness’ – or, more precisely, of mutual dependence – and of their meanings, show how impossible it is to strictly separate giving and exchanging or debt and credit or the sphere of intimacy from the sphere of calculability and impersonal exchange. The lability of meanings calls for abandoning a strict understanding of the spheres of exchange and a rigid separation between debt and gift. Instead, we adopted a conception of these spheres based on a difference of degrees and an overlaying of registers of relations

²⁶ Officially, a man must provide his ex-wife and their children with a room to live in when she cannot afford to move – in reality, few women accept this because it means staying in a house where she is not wanted, sometimes in contact with her ex-husband’s new wife. The alimony she is supposed to receive depends on the civil marriage, and for her children it is calculated on the number of children and the declared salary of the ex-husband. However, many salaries are informal or undeclared (especially those received in Russia), so pensions are often miscalculated and rarely collected. Interview with a lawyer from the National Centre for Women, Dushanbe, August 2012.

and their qualifications on the basis of contexts and subjectivities. We have shown that in a system of sociability in which gift/counter-gift transfers are central, the vocabulary of debt emerges at times of disagreement or conflict in order to requalify the nature of relationships, or even to make demands. Marriage, like ordinary hospitality, gives rise to social expectations, individual and marital hopes, and claims to expected rights. From this perspective, the biographical break of separation provides women with the means to challenge the status of the dowry and the relationship in which it is embedded. The discourse on debt serves – ultimately – not to label a type of transfer (e.g. a credit/debt relationship as opposed to a gift/counter-gift relationship). It signifies an injustice, a claim to a form of recognition, the aim to re-establish one's reputation and dignity. This conclusion is not specific to Tajikistan. Dissolving marital bonds often generates discourses of prejudice and unfairness all over the world. However, our examples show specifically the contradictory feelings these women have: they refer to a modern, capitalist, and commercial vocabulary to qualify the breach of traditional obligations towards them. The dowry, a tool of compensation and demonstration, remains vague in its amount, in its very meaning, ascribed by the party in a situation of superiority, and challenged here by demarried women.

Finally, here the language of debt reinterprets relations of kinship: it tells of the other's fault and aims to combat the devaluation of oneself in the matrimonial relationship. In so doing, it integrates the exchange into an order of reciprocal obligations embedded in time, while simultaneously making explicit the social hierarchy reproduced in and through marriage. It denounces the irruption of contingency and the unexpected. The rupture of the matrimonial bond signals the end of the interpersonal relationship, of the cycle of exchanges initiated during the wedding ceremonies, and reintroduces the possibility of a calculatory individualistic civic order, replacing the register of the intimate.

Debt as evoked by these demarried women is part of a broader reflection on a changing society, torn between the demands of geographical, emotional and social mobility on the one hand, and conformity to gender and parental roles that weigh differently on men and women on the other. These conflicting views on rituals are not rooted in a supposedly unilateral modernization of Tajikistani society, but arise from the multiple and contradictory tensions that run through it, namely migration, urbanization, individualization, the development of a consumer society and the pressure as well as the security provided by tradition.

Tajikistan's institutional and legal framework is weak when it comes to ensuring that obligations towards married women are respected, even though many marriages remain unofficial and unregistered. Would the introduction of a more rigorous judicial system for managing separations allow women to have access to a 'repayment' of debt, a 'final settlement' after a divorce, which would likely result in better post-separation self-esteem and empowerment?

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