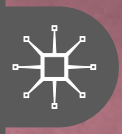

THE STEPPE AND BEYOND:
STUDIES ON CENTRAL ASIA

Uyat and the Culture of Shame in Central Asia

Edited by
Hélène Thibault · Jean-François Caron

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The Steppe and Beyond: Studies on Central Asia

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Surrounded between Europe and Asia, Central Asia has been neglected by many experts for a very long time. Many reasons may explain this situation, such as the language barrier and the fact that the region remained inaccessible for the most part of the 20th Century. However, this situation is clearly about to change in light of the growing interest of the academic interest for this region and the purpose of this series is to enhance the understanding of this region which is has always been at the crossroad of various civilizations. From a multidisciplinary perspective, this series examines the history of the region, its past struggles with colonialism and communism as well as the political and sociological challenges Central Asian countries are currently facing with the emergence of the new Silk Road and the strategic power shift in the region. It also proposes to render accessible to English-speaking readers the important oral literary tradition of Central Asia, which is one of the largest in the world.

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CHAPTER 1

An Overview of Shame and Its Manifestation in Central Asia

Hélène Thibault and Jean-François Caron

Shame, referred to as uyat in Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Uzbek, and as sharm or ayb in Tajik, remains a powerful regulatory mechanism in Central Asian societies that constrains individuals' behaviors and encourage them to conform to the dominant social norms. Shelekpayev defines uyat as "a set of repressive practices in relation to individuals or groups and their reactions to certain events, including the condemnation of obvious or perceived misconduct, guilt and imposition of guilt, body shaming, victimization and victim blaming, invention of (false) morality—that can be manifested through emotional and physical abuse" (Shelekpayev, 2020). In Kazakh, the expression "uyat bolady" (there will be shame) remains widely used and its invocation is meant to deter someone from doing something which people will consider shameful. These norms

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usually rely on a heteronormative conservative gender order, kinship solidarity as well as hierarchical family relations in which elders hold significant power. Uyat is locally depicted as an ancient tradition inherent to Central Asian communities (Krupko, 2020) but more than an old age reminiscence, its prevalence in contemporary social and political dynamics is undeniable, though disputed. In this volume, authors explore various manifestations of the culture shame in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

In contemporary Central Asia, discourses of shame are commonly used to regulate female behavior by asserting men's control over female mobility and sexuality. Popular narratives, and to some extent, official ones (Nozimova, 2022; Suyarkulova, 2016; Thibault, 2016), denounce self-expression, perceived promiscuous behavior or disrespect for national values and instead emphasize modesty, obedience and respect for tradition (Peshkova, 2021; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021). Most of the chapters in this volume will reflect the phenomenon of gender regulation, from the taboo of sex education in schools (Kabatova), favored heteronormativity (Levitanus) to the compliance of parents to give their firstborn to adoption to the husband's parents (Kenzhebaeva and Kim) whereas Kabylova's chapter will challenge the assumption that uyat norms are becoming more prevalent. Yet, uyat is not limited to the imposition of gender norms. It encompasses a wide range of social interactions such as taking care of one's elderly parents, expected family and kinship solidarity as well as public responsibility for people in position of power. In this volume, Caron also offers a theoretical discussion to distinguish between shame and guilt and highlight the societal mechanisms based on which uyat is made possible. Finally, Thibault's contribution addresses the many uses of shame in Kazakhstani politics as a form of political accountability in the absence of competitive elections.

While focusing exclusively on Central Asia, this volume resonates with previous research on the issue of shame focusing on different socio-economic contexts. The seminal works of sociologists Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* (2000 [1939]) and Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (2021 [1959]) have shed light on the issue of shame in contemporary Western societies. Scheff summarized Elias' argument in this schematic way: "1- As physical punishment decreased, shame became increasingly dominant as the main agent of social control. 2- As shame became more prevalent, it also became almost invisible because of taboo" (Scheff, 2014, p. 117). Stewart argues that in Euro-American societies, codes of honor and shame became obsolete by the 1900s with

the advent of state judicial control (Stewart, 2001). In contrast with most Western countries, in many Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Asian societies, shaming is not invisible and on the contrary is to some extent becoming even more prevalent, echoing Goffman's proposition about the risk of shame in all social interactions, from failure to participate in family gatherings, to dress inappropriately in public or to betray the country by allowing foreign interests to buy local companies or land. Peristiany's influential edited volume published in 1966 revealed the prevalence of honor and shame as a regulatory mechanism in Mediterranean societies, from Greece to North Africa (Peristiany, 1966). It emphasizes the importance of reputation and the tight social ties that unable shaming where honor is not individual affair but a collective one.

With the development of feminist studies, research on the issue of honor and shame conducted by anthropologists and sociologists has been increasingly focusing on the regulation of gender, sexuality identities and practices. Scholars have also shown how, across the Muslim world, the social order is heavily gendered and the honor of communities rests on women's behavior, preferably characterized by modesty and obedience (Gilmore, 1987; Gilmore & Feldman, 2010). Societies that rely on symbolic prestige and appearances also impose norms on men and "to perform 'manly', in other words, to exaggerate the qualities traditionally associated with masculine domination, such as power, strength and authority" (Stepien, 2014, p. 9). If codes of honor and shame are grounded in local contexts and temporalities, they also extend to migrant communities as Akpinar (2003) shows in her study of Turkish female immigrants in Sweden where the protection of women is maintained through control on their sexuality. Whereas the honor and shame system might be conceptualized as a reminiscence of traditional values and social order, its specific manifestations change over time and adapt to (post)modern realities and changing economic settings. Because it relies on closely knit communities, shaming tends to lose its potency in large, urban, diverse settings where social ties are not as strong and where one can live an anonymous life, free from the judgments of the community.

In contemporary Central Asia, honor and shame bears a specific significance because of nation-building processes that have contributed to the redefinition of social and ethnic identities since independence in 1991 due to the glorification of carefully selected national traditions. Honor and shame, a profoundly relational mechanism, is also impacted by the economic collapse that followed independence. The state disengagement

from social welfare led to an increase in people's reliance on local communities and extended family to secure their finances, access property or find good employment. In this context, personal behavior comes under more scrutiny and maintaining a good reputation can guarantee one's social esteem as well as financial and professional success. In terms of gender, the transformation of the Central Asian gender order reflects much of the Soviet state's codification of gender relations marked by the promotion of women's rights as well as heteronormativity and an unchanged division of labor at home (Kamp, 2016; Kandiyoti, 2007). A carefully crafted promotion of national traditions that occults a non-binary gender order that once prevailed in some regions of Central Asia, contributes to the reinforcement of conservative values and the imposition of hegemonic masculinity and femininity models (Peshkova & Thibault, 2022). In some communities, deviation from those definite, prescribed behaviors for men and women can lead to shaming.

In the field of Central Asian studies, some authors have contributed to our understanding of shame within local communities. For Shelekpayev (2020), uyat became an element of (bio) politics in Kazakhstan to impose a conservative heteronormative gender order in the mid-2000s when political expression became more limited which prompted people to resort to uyat tools to define their own identity, including political, which could not find expression by other means. In their investigation of bride-kidnapping in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Werner and Sataeva demonstrate that discourses of shame are used to pressure young women to stay in their "new family" after being abducted (Sataeva, 2017; Werner, 2009). Female sexuality is under intense scrutiny and female sexual pleasure denied or deemed unimportant (Harris, 2005; Thibault, 2018). In contrast, some studies demonstrate that women also find ways to circumscribe the fear of being shamed and make some independent choices, like becoming second wives (Thibault 2021) or lying to their surroundings or something more radical like hymenoplasty (reconstruction of the hymen) (Zhanabayeva, 2018, p. 37). Yet, for others this medical procedure represents a form of violence and might actually contribute to support gender discrimination and reinforce female submission (Kim et al., 2022).

In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, scholars have demonstrated that contrary to young females whose virginity must be preserved, young men are encouraged and pressured to show their sexual prowess (Harris, 2004, p. 79; Zhanabayeva, 2018, p. 39). In Kyrgyzstan again, research showed that poor men are pressured by their parents to marry in order to

acquire some social status despite not having enough savings to organize a proper wedding. In some cases, this leads to men abducting women to bypass the financial burden connected to notoriously lavish wedding ceremonies known locally as "toi" (Kim & Karioris, 2020). A few studies have addressed how uyat and prevalent gender norms also constrain men to act and perform according to an idealized version of masculinity. Focusing on Tajikistan and in light of deteriorating economic conditions, Behzadi shows how women miners' exclusion from mining work is negotiated through notions of honor and shame and linked to men's loss of sense of self since the disintegration of the USSR and the reconfiguration of masculinities with new work and resource struggles (Behzadi, 2019). In recent years, social media has also allowed shaming to be extended to the larger public and women's behavior continues to be scrutinized and reprimanded (Arystanbek, 2022; Kudaibergenova, 2019). Beyond gender dimensions, others have addressed shame in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and argued that the pressure to participate in family gatherings despite quarantine regulations might have contributed to the spread of the virus (Caron & Orlov, 2022) in Kazakhstan. Finally, focusing on broader family and community dynamics, scholars have also revealed that adult children will be shamed for inadequate care given to their parents (Kalysh et al., 2015).

In the public realm of Central Asian societies, a number of well-publicized events have demonstrated the prevalence of this social tool and the impact it may have on people, even the powerful. In 2017, Aliya Shagieva, the daughter of former Kyrgyz President Atambayev, created a scandal after she posted photos of her bump and of her breastfeeding her new-born child on Instagram. She was accused of shaming her family by sharing photos deemed too revealing (Amidi, 2017). Young people, and especially females, are clearly more affected by this custom which tends to reinforce a patriarchal conservative value system that emphasizes the importance of female modesty, a traditional family where the wife is subordinate to her husband, and children (even adults) to their parents. In 2018, Zere Asylbek, a then 19-year-old singer from Kyrgyzstan released a video clip which immediately went viral because of its perceived provocative content. In it, Zere appears wearing a loose, knee-lenght skirt, a purple bra, no shirt but a black blazer which reveals the flashy bra. Behind her, we see young women dressed in long robes. After jumping in a lake, all of them re-emerge wearing different outfits, ranging from jeans and

shirts to traditional Kyrgyz dresses. The message is meant to be emancipating, encouraging women to wear whatever they want. The video, and more specifically the singer's revealing outfit, provoked an intense backlash in Kyrgyzstan and Zere even received death threats for what conservative actors consider to be an insult to the Kyrgyz culture. The signer's father, who claimed not to be too much in favor of her approach nevertheless supported her and himself sharing a powerful message on social media: "Zere is my daughter. The free daughter of free Kyrgyzstan" (Wood, 2018).

Even though women are usually the primary targets of this custom, shame is used in a variety of ways and its weight is also felt by men, especially homosexuals and men who don't live up to societies' idea of masculinity, who are targeted and shamed for their behavior. One notorious example from Kazakhstan has to do with Q-pop[1] boy band *Ninety-One*. Despite being immensely popular among youth, their androgynous looks, use of make-up and colorful outfits made them very unpopular among conservative circles in Kazakhstan, who accused them of insulting national culture. Some of the band's concerts were canceled in the southern cities of Kyzylorda and Shymkent due to protests and the authorities' fear that anger could escalate (Tan, 2021). Given the strong heteronormative character of the dominant gender discourse in Central Asia, homosexuality inevitably also falls into the realm of uyat, if not of criminal behavior. There were long periods of Soviet history when homosexuality was outright criminalized and it remains so in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan today whereas Tajikistan, Kazakhstan have decriminalized homosexuality after independence. Yet, same-sex marriage is not recognized, and homosexuality is overall not socially accepted. According to 2019 survey results, a great majority of Kazakhstani respondents preferred not to have neighbors who are from the LGBT community. The numbers were particularly high (70.2%) among the 18–29 age group whereas 65,4% of respondents from the 61 years old and above category would be uncomfortable living next to homosexuals (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2019, p. 84). Cases of harassment, public shaming and violence are common in the region (Kluczewska, 2019). As Levitanus discusses in this volume, society's intolerance is internalized and non-heterosexual individuals are not only shamed by others but also *feel* shame. Given how much media

[1] Q-pop refers to Qazaqstani pop, a style of music that is inspired by Korean pop music known as K-pop.