Etiquette Rules and Intercultural Relations in Kazakh Society after Independence from the Soviet Union

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Abstract. This paper considers Kazakh traditional culture in terms of its etiquette rules. Four main blocks are explored: the etiquette of greeting and farewell, hospitality, family etiquette, and blessings, all of which are mandatory in everyday situations. This study acquires importance in relation to the complicated processes of interethnic relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Kazakhstan. Familiarity with the traditions and norms of behavior in Kazakh society as well a basic knowledge of ethnic etiquette serves to strengthen intercultural relations and to understand the ways of life of neighboring and distant peoples. This topic is of special importance in relation to the study of communication culture among interethnic groups after the collapse of the USSR.
Keywords: Kazakhstan, etiquette, interculturalism, post-Soviet period

INTRODUCTION

As integral parts of social culture, forms of communication are intimately connected with the peculiarities of a given society, its historically traditional forms of living and subsistence, and specific family and kinship customs and traditions. During the Soviet years Kazakhstan saw some of its national communication peculiarities weaken. Beginning in the 17th century, Russia gradually established military outposts along the Ural River, north of the Caspian Sea. The process resulted in the total annexation of Kazakhstan by mid-19th century. Large numbers of Russians and other ethnic groups began to settle in the region, disrupting traditional Kazakh migratory patterns. The introduction of sedentary agriculture and industry led to the deterioration of the Kazakhs' traditional nomadic pastoral lifestyle, a process that culminated in the Soviet era, in the 1930s and 1940s. The territory of Kazakhstan was used by the Soviet regime to

send colonists, dissidents, and minority groups from its other frontiers. Large numbers of ethnic Germans, Chechens, Tatars, Kalmyks, and other groups were exiled to Kazakhstan. Today, the majority of the population speaks Russian and only more than half of ethnic Kazakhs speak Kazakh fluently. Since independence, Kazakh language has state and Russian has official status.

Nikita Khrushchev's government initiated a recovery of the language, folklore, and other cultural expressions that had co-existed within the cultural and historical continuum of Kazakhstan. The recognition of this multicultural heritage is an integral part of Kazakh socio-cultural situation, while the country simultaneously seeks to maintain certain unifying values. The aspects presented in this paper in relation to Kazakh etiquette are of particular importance in strengthening Kazakhstan reactions to Soviet rule.

The specific content of etiquette and its place in social life is largely determined by the type of society. Typically, in traditional societies, with a strong tendency to group unity, closed and minimally affected by external factors, as is the case of Kazakh traditional society, etiquette rules were shaped by social behavior. Thus the evolution of these rules, which responds to social transformations, allows us to expose other phenomena that take place in that society. Some rules such as respect and kindness to elderly people, or gender differentiation, which have resulted from adopted standards of conduct spread through centuries. Others have varied over time and from region to region.

In the 20th century, modernization has brought great changes to society in general, and to etiquette standards in particular. In the case of Kazakhstan, the most relevant aspect was the enforced sedentarization of nomads and the destruction of the nomadic way of life, the collectivization of their farms, industrialization, urbanization and the influx of Russian migration as well as other groups into the territory. Today Kazakhstan a multiethnic country, home to over one hundred and ethnic groups. Kazakhs make the largest part of the population – 58.9%, while Russian - 25.9%, Ukrainians - 2.9%, Uzbeks - 2,8%, Uighur, Tatar and German - 1.5% each, and other groups 4,3%, according to Central Intelligence Agency *Factbook*.

Naturally, such huge changes have altered the basic principles of etiquette, transforming also Kazakh communication and behavior patterns, perhaps also contributing to modernization.

ETIQUETTE RULES OF KAZAKH SOCIETIES

Familiarity with the basic traditions and norms of behavior in a society, including the rules of etiquette, allows us to understand the nature of relationships within a given community, as well as between their neighbors and visitors. Observance of etiquette, on the one hand, allows a person to feel comfortable and confident in all situations of everyday communication, and on the other, the respect of their national customs determines tolerant attitudes towards other cultures. In this sense, the study of etiquette rules may contribute to the optimization of intra-national, interpersonal and intercultural communication in the context multiethnic Kazakhstan.

As an integral part of culture, communication is intimately connected with the peculiarities of the social structure of a society, the family household, kinship patterns, customs, traditions, and living lifestyles. The study of etiquette rules responds to social transformations and allows us to explore social changes and the impact of internal and external factors on the society as a whole.

The research of anthropologist from the European University of St. Petersburg, Albert Baiburin, has paid attention to the relation between etiquette and ritual. According to him, the rules of communication between different genders and age groups, as well as other forms of relation between social groups should be understand as etiquette. The main purpose of etiquette is to choose and apply a model of communication (including gestures, speech and other communicative acts) that adequately reflects the position of each of the participants in the communication process. This includes forms of social hierarchy that are acceptable to all parties involved. Etiquette and ritual, according to Baiburin, cannot coexist. Ritual forms that make a profane use of time cancel etiquette. The reason for this lies behind the fact that etiquette is an expression of the norms of everyday relations, while the ritual is performed in cases when the structure of the team (Baiburin, 1984: 23). He writes:

> The ritual (even periodical) is always an event, a certain crisis period in the collective life. The etiquette regulates the everyday norm, stability, balance, which is possible due to the ritual (i.e. the norm, which is confirmed with ritual). (Baiburin, 1988: 17)

For example, although business etiquette in Kazakhstan includes more European than Asian cultural forms, with the development of interna-

tional relations, the country strives for significance at the global business arena, etiquette rules play a very important part in this environment. Thus, participants of business meetings always follow Western style of clothing, and observe strict punctuality, although negotiations might take time and be carried on slowly. Kazakhs pay a lot of attention to detail, and they need time in order to be confident in trusting new people, who should proof reliable. The Kazakhs do business very subtly, and sometimes this takes some time until business partners build trust in their personal relations. Usually, the hosts speak of general affairs in order to provide information through diplomatic channels. In the discussion they do not like direct questions and all information is provided carefully.

Kazakh culture is collectivist and has a low competitive nature. Kazakhs ascribe great importance to cooperation, compromise, harmony, and maintaining and developing personal qualities and relationships. Dominant features of national psychology and sociology are persistence in achieving goals, endurance, perseverance, the ability to endure great difficulties; ability to adapt quickly to constantly changing conditions of life, a sense of common belonging, conformism, unity, negative attitudes toward conflict, and a tendency to solve difficulties using an arbitrator.

GREETINGS

Kazakh etiquette rules are most clearly reflected in greetings formulas. These follow social hierarchies that confirm the social structure of the society. There are numerous ritualized sign greetings, expressions of gratitude, good wishes, and so, which are specific for different genders and age groups. Honoring elderly people is common to all groups. Age, gender, social status, kinship, occupation, and degree of familiarity have a value for welcoming people, and determines their behavior at the social situation, for example a meeting. Mutual good wishes and the blessings of the elders are important in farewell. The basic formula greeting for males is *Assalamagaleikum*! (Arabic: "Peace to You!"), and *Wagalaikumussalam*! (Arabic: "Same I wish you!"), as in all nations professing Islam. The most common form of non-verbal greeting is a handshake (Meirmanova, 2008: 31). In greetings, the junior person should always greet the elder, a rule that also applies to social status. Thus, an employee should be the first to greet the head, and a student the teacher. When peers of same age, colleagues may greet at the same time. Traditional

rules are also followed with strangers. The verbal formulation of the Kazakh female greetings differ from men's. The most common female greeting is *Salemberdik*! ("I bow to you!"). The etiquette of women salutations among themselves includes several options; some shake hands as a greeting, while others just say "How are you?"

As a rule, women and men greet only verbally, without shaking hands. The general rule of priority greeting where the junior person welcomes the elder also applies to the greeting between genders: females of any age (young in the traditional hierarchy of precedence) greet first an older male or relative. Peers or people who have a small age difference usually greet by saying to each other: *Kalaisyn*? or *Jagdaikalai*? (in both cases "How are you?"). These greetings express varying degrees of closeness and different types of communication. The traditional greeting has a more solemn official character, while the unofficial *Kalaisyn*?, *Kalaijagdai*? imply a closer relationship between peers. The same people in different circumstances can shake hands differently. For example, in everyday situations peers use *Kalaisyn*!, but if they have not meetfor long time, then they use: *Assalamagaleikum*! (and the answer: *Wagalaikumussalam*!), greetings that emphasize the joy of meeting again.

HOSPITALITY

Hospitality remains one of the most important values of the Kazakh society. When guests are invited to a Kazakh home the host welcomes him or her with the words *uidenshaiishiniz* ("Drink some tea at our home"). The tea party does not follow strict etiquette rules, as for example a festive meal. However, tea parties also manifest basic principles of communication culture of the Kazakhs, for instance, goodwill and tolerance (Meirmanova, 2007: 128). The custom of hospitality among the nomadic peoples was one of the most reliable means of preserving social cohesion and strengthening internal relations. Etiquette rules around the welcome of a guest depended on the degree of kinship, age, social status, gender, and distance to his/her place of residence. The host always emphasizes the highest respect to the guest, even in cases of serious offenses or old grudges. According the Kazakh etiquette, it is forbidden to ask about the purpose of the guest visit in the first three days, during which time traveler receives all necessary services and honors. Patience towards the guest has survived to this day. The home team honors him or her not

matter how long he decides to stay in the Kazakh community (Meirmanova, 2007: 125). Rules associated to seeing off and saying farewell to guests included giving gifts, and these have been incorporated in contemporary situations, which are constructed by analogy with the traditional etiquette rules.

In Kazakh villages, traditional welcome and farewell formulas and gestures expressing reverence and friendship to guests still exist. Particular forms of greetings separate social groups with higher status (*tore*) in the southern and central regions of Kazakhstan. Greeting guests included forms of hospitality around meals, food eating, and table manners. These habits also evidence the existing social relations and the strict regulation of Kazakhs world order. It should be noted that in the past festive ritual meals among Kazakh nomad communities were organized on the basis of sex and age divisions. The types of food served at each occasion had primarily a symbolic and sacred value, associated to the magical rites of Tengrism. Many of these traditions have survived until today, a fact that shows the natural resilience of many customs. For instance, seating depended always on the age and social status. Position at the table was determined by the system of kinship and property, as was the distribution of meat during a meal. Thus, there was a complex classification of meat parts, from the carcass to the tender pieces. Foreign guests were considered the "gift of God," placed at the most important position at the table, and granted the best pieces. The guest's visit was considered a special grace. When several guest were present, they were seated according to their degree of prestige. Other members were accommodated according to sex and age. First, the male groups, starting with the elderly men, then the adult men (over 20 years), and finally boys and adolescents (15 to 20 years). The second group was formed by the female, beginning with the older women, the middle-aged women, and followed by the young married women, and finally the unmarried women (Shakhanova, 1998: 91). Food sharing also preserved the traces of sex and age division among the Kazakhs nomad communities. Key features of the early periods of human life cycle such as infancy and early childhood, childhood, adulthood, and old age were prominent within the celebrations which also served as socialization mechanisms during which the protagonist was taught instrumental activities, principles of kinship and social ties and so on.

GENDER SENIORITY AND RANKING RULES

Family members follow traditional etiquette rules. Thus, in the presence of guests or the husband's older relatives, the woman shows reverence and complies with the prohibition of pronouncing their name. She must also wear a head scarf and follow other traditional etiquette rules, particularly in front of strangers. For example, the manifestation of emotions in the relationship is not approved, and the wife must at all times publicly upbraid her husband and never diminish his dignity.

Seniority is preserved in all etiquette situations (except when rank prevails, as in military communities). In any situation, young people need to have respect for "elder," attention and willingness to be helpful. When talking to an older person it is forbidden to keep hands in the pockets, and perform certain casual acts which are commonplace in Western societies, such as chewing, smoking or drinking. The old person receives total attention in all circumstances, even when he or she is a burden to the young person. In the presence of older people, young people do not dare to speak loudly or laugh. They must also show modesty in all their replies to the older person. In the street or when using public transport, young Kazakhs people must always allow the elderly to be first. Seniors are never criticized or contradicted, especially in public places. In the family environment, elderly people are also obeyed, and during meals, they are served first.

In modern Kazakh society class rank power is transferred to the people who occupy prominent positions, such as President, Prime Minister, Deputy, or Akim (mayor) of the village. Respectful attitude towards the elders continues to be important. This is also shown in the place the superior person occupies, for instance in the center of the room, in front, above, or far from the entrance. The person of higher rankis always offered the place of honor, and sits on the left side of elders or of the head of the clan. During meetings, the major representatives of companies sit at a head table, and the remaining employees are placed in descending order of rank. During the meeting, the most senior starts the discussion, and then, the following attendees in rank order can enter the conversation.

KAZAKH ETIQUETTE TODAY

Modernization is a complex process of restructuring the nature of production, and with it, the socio-cultural system. Thus, some features of

traditional culture have changed. The characteristic features of Kazakh etiquette today preserves a combination of elements from traditional archaic Eastern cultures and modern urban, European habits. Despite the many transformations, the basic principles of traditional Kazakh etiquette have been preserved. Fundamentally, the principle of honoring the elders remains, as well as a hierarchy of seniority, which continuous to observed to a lesser degree. In Kazakhstan, tradition and modernity are considered coexisting systems which interpenetrate and mutually adapt.

Although Kazakh culture is traditionally a patriarchal one, with much respect being given to men, especially the elderly, etiquette rules are taking less formalized forms. The biggest change has taken part with regards to gender differentiation, associated with an increasing assertion of the equality of women. Thus, many of the rules that represent the superiority of the male are no longer observed. In general, Kazakh tradition is openly very respectful towards all its members and the principle of tolerance, which has a universal value, is the most important one, maintained in all occassions. Traditional etiquette rules and standards of conduct are available in ethnographic archives in Kazakhstan. However, there are difficulties in the identification of specific unifying features, since materials still bear the imprint of the different areas in the territory. Regional differences are the result of the different pace in modernization processes, and the specific behaviors of the diverse communities. The most complete and traditional form of etiquette seems to be observed by the Kazakhs long established in areas of Xianjan province in China, as part of the Uighur peoples, and in Mongolia, where welcome formulas are still preserved. Norms of traditional etiquette continue defining the behavior of the Kazakhs, especially the older generations, in rural areas of Kazakhstan, although it is increasingly losing traditional features and approaching European standard particularly in the largest cities.

CONCLUSION

Traditional society is characterized by gender and age differentiation, which is reflected in the norms of communication. Etiquette behavior emphasizes not only the dominance of men, but also gender differentiation. Features of the differences between male and female behavior are also reflected in their traditional dwellings, the folding-slatted housing

made of cloth and called *yurt*. The right side (*on zhak*) carried connotations of the place of the marriageable daughter. Upon reaching the age of marriage, women, who previously occupied the left side near their mothers, moved to the right side of the *yurt,* the male side, where their sleeping area was enclosed by a particular curtain named *kosege* (for more information on etiquette rules in the *yurt,* see Aljanova, Borbassova and Rysbekova, *forthcoming* 2015).

As we have mentioned in this paper, rules of etiquette greetings also varied between men and women, but those rules emphasizing the primacy of men are being increasingly replaced by Westernized norms of etiquette. Thus, in contemporary rural homes, and especially urban contexts, there is no division between the male and female halves, and the differences between male and female greeting formulas are gradually eroded.

The principle of seniority is typical of ancient societies. In traditional Kazakh culture seniority had a broad interpretation, including not just age, but family social position as well as hierarchical status in tribal groups. Today, seniority is still observed, sometimes in modified form, in all etiquette for greetings, feasts, and within family relationships.

This paper has explored the role of etiquette in Kazakhstan. After independence from the Soviet Union, the new nation is experiencing a revival of its traditions and a rise in national consciousness. Etiquette rules visualize behavior patterns, order and stability, effectively performing functions of value-orientation and protection (Tatarenko, 2007: 21). Many ethnographic studies of Kazakh tradition culture are under way. These show some variability in regional customs, which are also incorporating aspects of modernized culture, contributing to standardization.

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