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Mahalla – Traditional Institution in Tajikistan and Civil Society in the West



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EDITION

Introduction

My thesis topic focuses on first, understanding the function of *mahalla* — a traditional social institution in Tajikistan, which fulfills an important life-long role in promoting and preserving the cultural values of Tajiks, and second, on justifying the equivalence of mahalla to the concept of civil society in the West.

In this dissertation, I will search for an answer to the question why the traditional institutions in Tajikistan, especially mahalla, are inadequately involved in the development process or even at times, are dismissed from it. In my opinion, mahalla, as a social institution, is open to economic and political transformations because its structure is dynamic and flexible. The centuries-long history of mahalla manifests its vitality in various political and economic fields, albeit it also demonstrates how mahalla upholds values by carefully protecting them and discouraging change.

An historical sketch of mahalla illustrates the process of its development and adaptation throughout the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Its survival during the anti-religious and anti-nationalist propaganda launched by the Soviets is an evidence of the inrootedness of mahalla into the social fabric of daily life. As a social institution, mahalla sustains its own unwritten rules and codes of behavior, that altogether are based on cultural values. This reflects the peculiarity of Tajikistan, and leaves open the hope that mahalla can be used to implement various changes to enhance the lives of the Tajiks.

The structure of the dissertation is organized in such a way as to reach the above formulated aims. In the first chapter, I will work to explain the differences between the Western and Eastern cultures. On the basis of the scientific literature that I had been reviewing, I examined the opposing differences between these cultures: individualism- collectivism. I will work to justify that individualism is still an alien concept to Tajik society, whereas the spirit of community and collectivism have been ones of the prior hallmarks of Tajik culture throughout all its history.

In the second chapter, I will provide general information about mahalla and its history, structure and functions that are performed in relations to its members. As a part of this chapter, the description of informal institutions of Tajik society such as *avlod*, *qawm*, *jamomad*, *mashwarat* and *gashtak* are touched

upon¹. Due to their existence, the structure of Tajik society is different from the structure of all Western societies that I have studied. All these institutions play an important role in the life of every Tajik. The strength and power of these institutions show that they have significant sway on the economic conditions of the mahalla, and they can counterpart any unfavorable policies initiated by the state authorities. The third chapter contains general characteristics of civil society in the West and a discussion of some theories concerning this concept. Particular attention is devoted to the views of Piotr Glinski.

In the fourth chapter, I will pursue answering such central question, “Can mahalla be considered a counterpart to the Western concept of civil society?”. Subsequently, I discuss the views that might preclude the recognition of mahalla as civil society institution: referring to Robert Putnam’s point of view: the civil society cannot be embodied in a hierarchic society, and modernization theories stating that in the process of modernization, the traditional social institutions should be eliminated and replaced by new ones so in the case of Tajikistan it would be NGO’s replacement of mahalla.

Addressing to the view that mahalla is the equivalent of Western civil society, I will justify characterizing mahalla as a public benefit and point to cultural factors that produce a significantly higher social capital than is possible in Western society. At the end of the chapter, I will analyze the role of mahalla as a mediator between its members and the state administration. In the final portions of this chapter the specific attention is to be paid to justifying the view that through an appropriate legal basis, mahalla could be utilized as an instrument to bring Tajikistan closer to the notions of Western democracy.

In the West, with exception of Poland, mahalla has not commonly been the subject of scientific research. In Poland, several texts concerning mahalla were published. The texts were based on actual Polish field studies. I am pleased to say that my personal views about the social role of mahalla fall fully in line with assessments of Polish researchers. I see this as confirmation that my belief about mahalla being used as an instrument of political transformation is not idiosyncratic, taking into account the fact that the author is an ethnic Tajik.

1 The meaning of these concepts will be explained later in the work.

Methodology of data collection

1.2.1. Hierarchy of data sources

During my research, I used several tools and methods to deepen the understanding of the subject and to collect a diverse array of data for explanation and analysis. This paper will present data sources and discuss the chosen methodological topics related to the data collection process. These methods include:

- reading ethnographic literature concerning mahalla and reviewing the archives of mahalla;
- the conducting of interviews with members of various mahallas and representatives of the international aid organizations working in Tajikistan;
- an analysis of publications concerning traditional institutions in Tajikistan;
- a participant's observation of life in mahalla, based on the author's own experience.

1.2.2. Analyses of historical and ethnographical literature concerning mahalla

For the reason of existing several sources of data, it would be logical to think about hierarchy of the sources of this dissertation. The ethnographic and historical literatures provided the core of the research. It would have been impossible to write about this subject without knowledge about the history and the creation of the traditional institutions, especially mahalla. The main sources concerning the history of mahalla are Narshakhi's book, "History of Bukhara", Sukhareva's book, "*Квартальная община позднефеодального города Бухары* (Quarterly community of late feudal city Bukhara)" and Sadriddin Ayni's books concerning the daily life in the mahallas of Bukhara.

It should be noted that there is almost a complete absence of Western sources on mahalla. As I have stated above, it has not been the subject of scientific research, except in Poland. In my dissertation, I have referenced Arabic, English, Polish, Russian and Tajik sources. The papers written by Western authors were useful as instrument in such degree to prevent the appearance of any possible pro-Tajik bias in my research.

1.2.3. In-depth interviews with mahalla members

To collect primary source data, I conducted a focus group and semi-structured interviews with key informants (mahalla members, members of council of elders and Rais- the head of mahalla), and also performed an analysis of secondary

sources. The data received was mostly qualitative, which added some peculiarity to the description of the results of the study. I hope this method helped me to receive answers to the hypothesis mentioned in the introduction. I also prepared questionnaires for the semi-structured interviews with the key informants – head of mahallas, members of mahalla, mulla and council of elders. I had open interviews and was a participant observer in different parts of Tajikistan: Badakhshan autonomous region (mountainous province in the east of Tajikistan), Dushanbe (capital city), Hisor², Fayzabad³, Shahrinaw⁴, Tursunzoda⁵ and Sughd region (northern part of Tajikistan). I had conducted 60 interviews, however, I only have recorded 25 of them. I had 15 interviews with different mahallas in Hisor region, five interviews in Dushanbe, and three with people from the Sughd Region and two in Gorno-Badakhshan (Autonomous Province). The questionnaire and the subjects of the focus group interviews are included in the appendix that provides an opportunity for a detailed review.

As it was mentioned before, I did not record all interviews. However I had used all of them in my dissertation. I chose these regions because of the complexity of geographical, economic and identical factors. Further in my dissertation I will give more information about differences between regions in Tajikistan. Additionally, in some regions mahalla includes all traditional functions and some mahallas are less traditional.

I conducted my field research during summers of 2010, 2011 and 2012 while on vacation in my home country. The 10 interviews of the 25 total were con-

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- 2 Hisor Region (also transliterated as Gissar in Russian or Nohiyai Hisor: Ноҳияи Ҳисор in Tajik) is a region in the Region of Republican Subordination, in Tajikistan, located between Varzob region in the east and Shahrinaw region in the west (ap. 22 km from Dushanbe).
 - 3 Faizobod region (in Tajik: Ноҳияи Файзобод) is a small region in the Region of Republican Subordination. It is located about 60 km east of the capital Dushanbe. It borders with Vahdat region from the west and the north, the Roghun district from the east, and the Khatlon Province from the south.
 - 4 Shahrinaw district (in Tajik language: Ноҳияи Шаҳринав) is a district in the Districts of Republican Subordination in Tajikistan. The region is located between Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe and Uzbekistan. Shahrinaw has borders with Tursunzoda in the west, Hisor in the east, and Rudaki (former Lenin district) in the south. It is approximately 48 km west of Dushanbe.
 - 5 Tursunzoda region (Tajik: Турсунзода,) is the westernmost region of the Regions of Republican Subordination (RRP). It borders with Uzbekistan in the west and is enclosed by Tajikistan's Shahrinaw region from the other directions (ap. 60 km from Dushanbe).

ducted at participant homes, 8 were conducted in mosques after prayer, 4 were in teahouses and 3 were in offices. The average time of my interviews lasted from 1 to 1.5 hour. At the same time interviewees were not in hurry. Beforehand, I arranged time to do my interview comfortably to last at least one hour. Most respondents proposed to conduct interviews at their homes. As previously mentioned, eight were conducted in mosque after prayer.

I selected participants according to the following criteria: social status and position of influence in the life of mahalla (for example, the head of mahalla, vice head of mahalla, member of council of elders). Moreover, the majority of my respondents are highly educated. Thus I selected mahalla members with high education and who are very active in everyday life. As for gender characteristics – 20 respondents were men and 5 were women in the main group. The representation of women is much lower because men publically participate in everyday life of mahalla, because women are occupied with family issues⁶.

Concerning religious belief, all of my respondents without any exception declared their belief in God, and stated they were Muslims. When asked about religious practice (praying five times a day- namaz), I found out that most of them conducted regular namaz (five times a day). Most of them visited mosque at least once a day (some of them from one, two up five times praying in mosque). Only 3 of my respondents from two regions participated in prayers only during Muslim holidays and funerals. Mostly all of them regarded religion to be a significant part of Tajik culture and almost all of them used verbal references to God during our conversations. They all agreed that Islam has to be revived among Tajiks and that it is a basis of moral and traditions. It should be noted that at the same time, they opted for separation of religion and politics.

My advantage is that I am a mahalla member who had been living for 23 years in mahalla. I have participated in the daily life of mahalla, and in rituals like weddings, funerals, mahalla meetings, jamomads, gaps, holidays and many others. Being a member of mahalla in this study provides me with rich background information about the psyche of average people, both in the private and public spheres of life. In general, being an actual member of mahalla bestows the researcher with enormous benefits.

As I mentioned above, I conducted 15 interviews in the region where I was born and raised. I was a member of mahalla and I participated in its daily life. The inhabitants of the region know me well. It was an advantage that the inter-

6 The issue on role of women in Tajik society will be detailed discussed in the separate subchapter.

viewees knew me, as typically most people in mahalla do not trust foreigners, thereby making it very difficult for some researchers even to have a chance of conducting some interviews. I am from their mahalla and their region, which enabled them to openly agree to be interviewed. Firstly, not a single candidate refused, and I could easily reach every respondent with whom I wanted to speak. All interviewees reacted positively to the interviews and they freely provided their answers without any hesitations. Secondly, it should be noted that in all interviews, there was a professional distance between the respondents and me, as a researcher, even regarding such respondents who knew me very well. During the interviews, when the respondents entered into the role of an interviewee, their conversation became more stiff than usual.

1.2.4. Participant observation of daily life of mahalla and mahalla meetings (majlis)

As it has been previously stated, I was raised in mahalla and I am very well aware of its culture. As a part of this cultural upbringing, I had a lot of opportunities to participate in wedding ceremonies, funerals, davras or gashtaks, hashars, solving conflicts among neighbors and in mahalla meetings (majlis). During the performance of one of my interviews, I attended one mahalla majlis, where they hold an election to select the head of the mahalla. I was focused on the clarity and faithfulness of the democratic process of decision-making, so I analyzed the voting procedures of the informal mahalla meetings.

In my research, I used the principle of methodological relativism, which means that in researching another culture, one should not describe its social institutions and behavioral patterns through the perspective and experience of one's own culture. Cultural relativism is an approach to comparative analyses of the cultural differences. The key word relativism stresses the variability and non-similarity of traditions and moral issues experienced by the cultures. The relative, ambiguous character of the factual and value judgment differs between cultures, putting them into perspective of the providing different values on the same theme while not necessarily providing an opposite values on the same theme.

In addition, there are two ways that a judgment might be relative to a culture. Firstly, its truth (or falsehood) might be relative to the culture. That is, the judgment might be true in a relative rather than an ordinary, non-relative way. Secondly, the judgment might be true in an ordinary way but be relative to a culture through a tacit reference to the culture. In the first case, the relativity of the judgment derives from the relativity of moral truth. In the second, the relativity

derives from the content of the judgment. The two cases differ sharply, but this is not noticed, much less appreciated, in the classic sources for relativism⁷.

The issue of judgment, the expression of attitude towards particular phenomenon or situation, alters in different cultures for the reason that the starting points are different, i.e. traditional background, morality and types of behavior.

The paradox of my situation lies in the fact that I am a Tajik who has experienced Western culture with my own eyes, and who must now relate to the cultural experience where I was raised. I hope I have gotten to know Western culture well enough to allow me to distance myself from the cultural concepts and beliefs with which I was raised. In my case, using the principle of methodological relativism is an attempt to look at my own culture as though it were foreign. In attempting to watch Tajik culture from a different perspective, I am still conscious of the values it represents for me. However, I hope that this awareness does not damage the quality of my descriptions.

7 Tilley, J.J. (2000). Cultural relativism. In *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 22, Nom. 2, May, p. 3.