

## “Clan Politics” or “Patron-Client” Relations in Post-Soviet Central Asia:

### In Postcolonial Discourse

#### **Introduction**

Claims about “tribalism” which generally used term by Central Asian scholars and “clan politics” by international scholars have become a notorious discourse in Central Asian studies in recent years. There several motives to explain for this tendency however the collapse of Moscow centric system and attaining an independence, which led to the search of national identity and state-building straggle are the main reasons to discuss about “tribalism” and/or “clan politics” today. However, local as well as international scholars confuse the concept “clan” as it has double meaning as a network and a tribe; misuse the concept “tribalism”; and consider these concepts apart from patron-client relations. In other words, scholars using concepts “clan” and “tribalism” study informal networks in Central Asia excluding from patron-client relationship, which leads to postcolonial discourse. Therefore, I have found some gaps in studying the political development in Central Asian studies because of inadequate using of concepts “clan” and “tribalism” in political science, and since it is a little studied topic today. I will attempt to clarify why “clan” and “tribalism” misused in studying Central Asian Politics and why it leads to postcolonial discourse. These work is based on theoretiacl part and contrubutes to Central Asian Study.

#### **Case study of Kyrgyzstan**

The research concentrates on the study of “tribalism” or “clan ties” in Kyrgyz politics and its position in political development since its independence. Importance of the study “tribalism” or “clan ties” is grounded on examining the question: Does “tribalism” or “clan ties” characterize Kyrgyz politics or patron client relations contain “clan ties” in itself.

Today local and international scholars provide with different works about the political development in Kyrgyzstan; however I found certain gaps in studying “tribalism” or “clan politics” in Kyrgyzstan; and it allows the postcolonial discourse. Using these terms some scholars attempt to examine politics in the country in the framework of “clan ties”, “clan clientalism”, “regionalism”, and simply in “tribalism”; but not in “patron clientalism”. Consequently, I will endeavour to examine how local and international scholars study about politics in Kyrgyzstan, and how they use terms as “clan ties”, “tribalism” and “patron client ties”.

First of all, it must be pointed out that traditional structure of the Kyrgyz society being divided into tribes confuses and makes challenges to explain the political development (see the map of tribes).

Since its independence in Kyrgyzstan, the term “tribalism” has been started to be frequently used in politics while it is not a finding. Local scholars such as S. Attokurov, A. Dononbaev, Z. Kurmanov, A. Mokeev and international scholars as E. Schatz, D. Gullette, K. Collins, P. Jones Luong, S. Roberts, and others give different conceptualization on the term “tribalism and “clan politics” in Central Asia. Apart from terms “tribalism” and “clan politics”, terms as “clientalism” or patron-client relations, regionalism, nepotism, corruption, “pact”, “informal network”, “social network”, “clan network” and others are in use to examine political development in Central Asian states. Considering “tribalism” different from the kinship categories “tribe” and “clan”, David Gullette argues that “tribalism” in Kyrgyzstan is “a form of corruption expressed through the particularisms of kinship and regional ties” (Gullette, 2006). Kathleen Collins and Edward Schatz focusing on “clan politics”, illustrate “tribalism” as informal networks. According to Collins, informal networks based on “kinship” and “fictive kinship”, they are political actors and pursuit “clan” interests. (Collins, 2006). For Edward Schatz, “clan” is “kinship-based social division”, however this terminology does not stand for “kinship” it is more than “kinship” itself (Schatz, 2005). Therefore, Schatz states that the position of kinship-based divisions is an erratic. Indeed, “tribe” is very different from “tribalism”, also “tribe” and “clan” are different from each other. For the Kyrgyz meaning of “tribe” as *uruu* unlike from “clan” as *uruk*, and *uruu* not always refers to a descent line as *uruk* does” (Haviland, 1978). “Tribalism” means tribal ties, regionalism

and nepotism among the local scholars and the population. Therefore, other forms of informal networks are taken a little space not only by local scholars but also by international scholars.

As for the term “clan”, I believe that it is a variable and by using this term, any researcher must clarify what meaning is used for a study. To put it clear, the term “clan” has two different meaning in Russian as well as in English, first meaning is “family” or “sib” category, second is “band”, “grouping”. For example, the Kennedy clan is *semeystvo Kennedi* and the Kennedy clan is *klan Kennedi*, there are two different meanings ([www.multitrans.ru](http://www.multitrans.ru)). Different meaning of “clan” therefore makes confusion in explaining “clan politics” regarding Central Asian countries.

Revisiting Collins’s work on the concept “clan”, for Collins “clan” is the most closely related to “tribe” not to “clientilism” (Collins, 2004). Conversely, Schatz explains kinship network through “clan clientelism” and “clan balancing”, in other words he uses the term close to regionalism. Collins uses the term “clan network”, where informal social networks rooted in kin and fictive kin ties. She argues that since “patron client networks linked to extended families”, it is problematic to adopt term “clientalism” instead of “clan” (Collins, 2006). Collins on the other hand, points out that term “clan” has become popular especially in the media and among foreign policy analysts, to describe corrupt power groups, oligarchs, and even mafia groups in Russia, the Ukraine, and elsewhere” (Collins, 2006 ). By these statements, she neglects that she uses “clan” for Central Asian states if it is used in Russian or post-Soviet studies too. To be precise, arguing that “clan” is not related to clientalism Collins contradicts herself that “clan” has become an indefinite term in politics and is used in other parts of the world.

Sean Roberts has different point of view, he contends that Schatz gives specific explanation but others provide with a “confusing array of kin-related and regionally defined ties to illustrate the universality of clanism across ethnic and cultural lines in the region” (Roberts, 2008). Consequently, Roberts states that the patron-client relations are still based in Soviet rather than Central Asian traditions, and Central Asian civil society are more disposed to democratic than anti-democratic clan or tribe-based community.

Remarkable point related to kinship-based division in Kyrgyzstan, Pauline Jones Luong states that kinship division based on the North and South separation in Kyrgyzstan as a result of Soviet policies. After examining several scholars' works regarding with "clan ties", we can see that the term "clan" can be interpreted in various meanings and it mostly refers to "tribal ties", regionalism and nepotism.

Since the study of Central Asian politics are conducted by not only political scientists but also by historians, anthropologists, and others; epistemological approach toward the study of "tribalism" and "clan politics" in Central Asia is various. Yet this research is framed within political science and attempts to fill in gaps in explaining "clan politics" in particularly Kyrgyzstan, and according to the author "clan ties" is included in patron client relations.

The author also includes other dimensions of informal ties under patron client relations such as classmates (*klastashtar/odnoklassniki*), military mates (*armiyada choguu bolgondor/soslujivtsi*), country mates (*jerdeshter/zemlyaki*), and nepotism (*tuuganchilik/rodstvennie otnosheniya*).

## **Conclusion**

In this theoretical part of my study, my argument is that the term "clan" is needed to be defined and then used to explain informal politics in Central Asian countries. My suggestions: first, to use *uruu* and *uruk* in original language; second, if a scholar prefers to use the term "clan", it must be clarified. In addition, I believe that this research attempts to fill gaps in studying what makes politics in Kyrgyzstan, "clan politics" or patron client relations. If any scholar who judges that "clan politics" in terms of "tribal ties" makes politics in Central Asian states, then the discussion turns in to the post-colonial discourse. Nevertheless, using Kyrgyzstan as an example, I argue that the term "clan" leads to a post-colonial discourse about the region that depicts Central Asia as backward and primitive.

## **English(Kyrgyz/Russian) translation**

clan (*uruk/rod/klan*),

tribe (*uruu/rod/plemya*),

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## **Interviews**

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Director, International Development Studies Program Elliot School, March 2008.