KINSHIP & MARRIAGE in the SOVIET UNION

Field studies

Edited by
Tamara Dragadze

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book 'Problems of precapitalist society' ('Problemy dokapitalisticheskogo obshshestva'), Moscow, 1968.

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Family and family life, in 'Ethnographical sketches of the rural Uzbek population' ('Etnograficheskie ocherki uzbekskogo sel'skogo naseleniya'), Moscow, 1969.
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Peoples of Yugoslavia, in 'Peoples of Non-Soviet Europe' ('Narody zarubezhnoi Evropy'), 1964.
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Contents

Introduction

Tamara Dragadze

This volume can serve two purposes. On the one hand, people interested in the Soviet Union will have at their disposal translations in English of materials that will demonstrate both the style of Soviet scholars who write in social anthropology, and the richness of living traditions among the diverse nationalities of the country. On the other hand, there has recently been an increasing interest in ethnic relations throughout the various parts of the world. It is of some fascination, at a more general level, to see that despite over half a century of Soviet rule providing a uniform economic and political system, in the sphere of family and marriage the variety of customs is tremendous.

REGIONAL REPRESENTATION

My choice of papers has been governed by several criteria. First, I decided that each of the regions which have been designated by Soviet ethnographic convention should be represented. The Soviet Union is usually divided into the following sectors for study: the Baltic states, the 'European part' of the USSR, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia (including the 'Far North'). The general features of each region I describe separately with the papers, but here I will merely state that their coverage by ethnographers has been uneven. Through historical accident, e.g. the evacuation of the Leningrad ethnographic institute to Tashkent during the war, resulting in an increased interest in Central Asia, or else through native tradition, e.g. Georgia and Armenia have always had an educated intelligentsia interested in national traditions, or for the sake of convenience, e.g. doing fieldwork in the countryside surrounding the capital you live in, some parts of the Soviet Union have engendered intensive ethnographic description at the expense of others. Furthermore the availability of published materials varies considerably, depending on whether the authors work and write for the Moscow and Leningrad branches of the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, in which case they are accessible, or whether the works are printed locally by the publishing houses of the minority republics' institutes, in which case accessibility for all other colleagues, Soviet as well as the even worse-placed faraway Western scholar, is often

problematic. Some republics, e.g. Georgia, publish the majority of their works in the native language, others, e.g. Tadjikistan, publish more in Russian, their department of ethnography having less administrative independence from Moscow. In the Baltic states, furthermore, after their absorption into the Soviet Union when Marxist cadres were sent from Russia to train local scholars, students of ethnography have devoted themselves mostly to the study of material culture, in which they excel, and so local literature on kinship and marriage is not so readily available (one exception is the work of Vilve Kalits in S. Dunn (ed.), 'Soviet Ethnography', 1973).

FIELDWORK

Besides regional representation, a criterion governing my choice of works was that they should be based on ethnographic fieldwork. This in fact ruled out many publications since, by and large, Soviet anthropologists do more historical-documentary studies than in the West, at least in the Anglo-Saxon schools. Here also the fieldwork tradition differs considerably (see Dragadze, Ethnographic Fieldwork in the USSR, 'Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford', 1978). For example, rather than spend one or two uninterrupted periods of eighteen or more months in the field, the Soviet anthropologist usually goes for short visits, often a couple of months in the summer over several years to the same area, gathering field data. This causes a difference in both style and method as exemplified in an entertaining way by Basilov's account of his trip in this volume. Using whatever personal information I could obtain on the authors, I have strictly limited my choice to works by anthropologists whose study in the given areas is of long standing and whose knowledge of the local language is equivalent, if not much better especially if a native himself, such as Annaklychev, to the best standards we have expected of social anthropologists in Britain. It is the case too that Soviet anthropologists do not believe overwhelmingly in any advantages of working alone in the field (E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Social Anthropology', 1951). They often study as members of a large 'complex expedition' including archaeologists, architects and others, or as part of a team of anthropologists each interested in one particular aspect of study: religion, kinship, material culture and so forth. I have nevertheless preferred to choose monographic field studies for this volume, mainly because of my above-mentioned criterion, since it is those who have worked alone who have also had to learn the language and do lengthy work. Large-scale ethnographic expeditions sponsored by the institutes are less likely to be mounted summer after summer to exactly the same place.

The problem of confidentiality in the Soviet Union is very great for social anthropologists (Dragadze, 'Royal Anthropological Institute Newsletter', June 1980). Self-censorship is blatantly evident, for example, in Terent'eva's article in this volume, where not only does she have to conform to official ideological views of how things ought to be in Latvia and fit facts accordingly, but it would have been difficult for her to reveal, even orally if not in print, how many religious family ceremonies she had actually witnessed while there was such official pressure against them when she did her work. The problem of informants' confidentiality presents moral and practical difficulties for most anthropologists working in literate, complex societies, not only confined to totalitarian states (for example, see Ann Sutherland, 'The Hidden Americans; the Gypsies of California', 1976) but of course these problems are exacerbated in a political situation where local officials could be asked to investigate information published in the capital city by an anthropologist. A problem particular to such a state as the USSR, of course, is that controversial information not reflecting official descriptions of social facts would not get published anyway, except in the form of indignant criticism of the people concerned.

STYLES OF THOUGHT

In my choice of papers I have tried to demonstrate the approaches to the study of kinship and marriage most representative of the Soviet school. The most dominant feature of Soviet anthropology is that all data is sought, analysed and presented within an historical framework. As Gellner so aptly put it:

> [In British anthropology] one still has the impression that each society trails its own past behind it, as a comet trails its tail. The tail is studied as this comet's tail, its interest is a function of the interest of the comet, not the other way around.... It is here that the contrast with the instinctive thought-style of a Soviet anthropologist is most marked. One might say that for the Soviet scholar the interest of a comet generally speaking is a function of the interest of its tail, and that all such tails fuse, at least in principle, in an all-embracing history of mankind [E. Gellner, The Soviet and the Savage, 'Current Anthropology', vol. 16, no. 4, 1975].

In the study of kinship and marriage the tendency established by Engels and adopted by Soviet ideologues is to create typologies representing different stages of historical development, notably and notoriously 'matriarchy' and 'patriarchy', the one preceding the other. Yet this usage has changed considerably in the Soviet Union. In the late Stalin period, Kosven was reprimanded for not having been sufficiently

'party-minded' because he stressed the importance of avuncular relations among the Caucasian peoples he wrote of. He defended himself by replying that, on the contrary, his study of the role of mother's brother was politically important because it could be used to fight bourgeois foreign anthropologists who denied the relevance of matriarchal survivals. Recent publications, and they with the sole exception of Popov form the contents of this volume, have gone a very long way from there. Butinov has even gone so far as to write - and actually have published - about his doubts on the whole concept of matriarchy. Fainberg's article here comes closest to the older Soviet tradition, which is one of the main reasons I have chosen it to demonstrate the more classical style of Soviet thought. For a Western anthropologist the approach is almost quaint, so far back in this century is its equivalent in our literature. No other comprehensive theoretical model has been offered to Soviet anthropologists which would have full Party backing. They tend now to retreat to writing straight descriptions of their ethnographic data, presented as part of a history of the people concerned, but with little overt analysis. It would nevertheless be mistaken to view the work of Soviet anthropologists as unsophisticated because of the apparent simplicity of presentation. Bardavelidze's paper demonstrates masterly handling of complex data. The two papers at the end of the volume, by Kryukov and Girenko, point to thoughtful reasoning on issues not subject to the restrictions on the discussion of some other wider theoretical issues. It is important in this context to remember that in Soviet Marxist anthropology in recent times, characteristics of kinship and marriage are presented as 'cultural' features of a society, not as socio-economic (or structural-functional) factors, that is to say they are handled more as we would describe a costume or a sculpture. Semyenov has written (Dragadze, A Meeting of Minds, 'Current Anthropology', 1978) that kinship relations have no reality in themselves, are ephemeral reflections of a society's infra-structure, nothing more.

AMBIVALENT ATTITUDES

As can be noticed in the papers, the authors are reluctant to be pinned down to actual dates when customs were observed and, in several cases, the descriptions are accompanied by such catchphrases as 'but this custom is dying out'. Thus we are told that the author is referring to 'ancient times' or else the whole question of time is quietly ignored. There are indeed tensions between the view that in Soviet times there should be convergence of thought and custom by all Soviet peoples, characterised by secularisation, and the view that it is legitimate that the ways of each of the Soviet nations should be 'national in form' although, as Stalin also stressed, 'social-

ist in content', and here 'socialist' usually refers to patriotic loyalty to the centralised regime. Anthropologists writing explicitly about the present, such as Terent'eva (in the second half of her article) and Annaklychev, in their anxiety to present their informants in the best possible light, embellish their descriptions with morally biased pronouncements on 'progress' and so on. This ambivalent, almost apologetic attitude is even more obvious in Annaklychev, a non-Russian author, whose keenness to show the discontinuity between pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary Turkmen ways - the latter being characterised by 'progressive' and here this means Europeanised features - dampens his enthusiasm and national pride in the colourful uniqueness of Turkmen custom. In contrast, Shikhareva's article on Russians in the Kuban displays more self-confidence.

ETHNIC DIVERSITY

It would take several volumes to seek actually to explain, in terms acceptable to serious Western scholars in a highly contentious theoretical field, the diversity of customs and their persistence in the USSR. But my intention here has been rather to select materials for the debate itself. In my opinion, anyway, each Soviet nation has its own story to tell as to why and how it kept and developed its particular set of traditions under the regime. These regional cases are intricately linked to the reactions to the nationalities policy of the Soviet government. It must be pointed out that for the minority nationalities Soviet ways have always been associated with Russian culture and have not appeared in the popular eye to represent a supranational Marxist ideology as apparently accepted in sections of Latin America, for example. Non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union have been incorporated into a highly centralised political regime which, ultimately, is Moscow-dominated.

Reactions at a domestic level vary for different reasons. When Soviet government came to the Baltic state of Latvia where in its capital city, Riga, a higher level of technology was to be found than in most parts of the Soviet Union itself, urban attitudes there to Soviet messages calling for changes in customs and traditions would have been characterised by a very particular form of resistance. Rural experience would differ significantly. In places, including rural Russia, where the Moscow-led Soviets appeared as agents of genuinely improved living conditions through bringing a level of technology which was fascinating and pleasing to unsophisticated people, attitudes towards social change were more ambiguous. At another level this same ambiguity is reflected in the papers presented here. The anthropologists are conscious too, as all

those familiar with the history of Soviet policy will know, that the 'nationalities question' has always been a very delicate as well as lively subject of discussion in the USSR. At a local level, among the peoples studied themselves, there is constant discussion of the problem of whether a particular custom should be viewed as 'religious' or 'folk-traditional' and whether consistent with some undefined notion of 'progress' or not. It is in no way my aim to indulge in political commentary at the expense of anthropological analysis, but it is imperative that readers be aware of the background in which some of the papers are written.

ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE USSR

In the mid-nineteenth century an ethnographic society was set up in St Petersburg by learned scholars and gentlemen of leisure, many more liberal-minded than some of their counterparts in the Royal Anthropological Institute in London, but they shared an interest in discovering more about the minority peoples who had now become part of the Russian Empire. In the early twentieth century some of the anthropologists who were also active in opposing the repressive aspects of the imperial government were exiled to Siberia. Bogoraz-Tan, Shternberg and others did excellent fieldwork among the tribes of the far north, dependent on the natives for their own survival (in contrast to the superior power-position of British anthropologists in Africa. See Talal Asad, 'Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter', 1973), returning as heroes after the Bolshevik revolution. With Lenin and other leaders' interest in minority peoples of the new Soviet fatherland, anthropologists with officially approved reputations developed a school of ethnography based on the intense gathering of ethnographic detail coupled with an evolutionary type of analysis rooted in Marx's, or rather Engels's version of historical materialism. At the same time, they were increasingly cut off from contacts with Western thought (Dragadze, Reply to Gellner, 'Current Anthropology', vol. 16, no. 4, 1975). The so-called Malinowskian revolution passed them by, for example, and it was only in the Brezhnev period that they were emerging from their isolation.

It is significant in this context that Kryukov, who is excellently acquainted with Western literature in several languages and extremely up to date, nevertheless has had to confine himself in his work included here to old references. He alludes to authors such as Rivers because the article was published in 'Sovetskaya Etnografiya' (the main and central ethnographic journal in the USSR) which is destined to a wide readership among anthropologists throughout the country, some of whom, unlike many of their colleagues in Moscow and Lenin-