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*Narrative Knowledge and Social Capital  
in Two Village Communities in Yakutia*

Ph.D. Dissertation

*Summary*

Budapest, 2010

## *Research Objectives*

With the combined study of three distinct research objectives, the dissertation aims to examine the functioning of community life in two villages of Yakutia (Küp and Tanda) on the basis of a 12-month-long fieldwork I conducted between 2002–2009. First, I propose an alternative way of contextualising fieldwork data. In anthropological research (especially in Siberia) the characterization and description of indigenous communities traditionally depend largely on their geographic location and/or ethnic affiliation. Analysing data collected in Küp and Tanda persuaded me to theorize these communities as *marginalized* and *subordinated* ones rather than concentrating on their ethnic status or geographically and ecologically determined lifestyle. Thus, I position these communities within the *power relations* of the Russian state, investigating questions concerning the autonomy, the controllability and the vitality of the communities under survey. Both of the examined communities can be characterized with dependence on state subsidies, economic fragility and marginalization. Therefore I investigate the current socio-economic situation of the villages from the aspect of their constant (and in certain periods clearly colonial) subordination and marginalization in the network of Russia's power relations. The marginal position of Küp and Tanda contributed to the formation of cooperative groups and influenced the degree of community cohesion.

Secondly, the dissertation discusses the possibility of involving the concept of *social capital* in anthropological analysis sensitive to the cultural embeddedness of social relations. This problem emerged in course of the examination of the economic strategies and locally available resources of the marginalized village communities. Generally speaking, social capital is a *resource* generated by individuals embedded in social networks and it is potentially obtainable for the individuals to achieve their own purposes. I argue that the investigation of the accumulation and employment of social capital as a local resource may contribute to a better understanding of the functioning of interpersonal relations and social groups in marginalized communities. The concept of social capital concentrates on the obtainability and the functioning of social relationships, rather than on defining relationship types (kinship, friendship, neighbourhood). Therefore discussing the locally meaningful types of social relations, I focus on how these relations can put into effect, and what values provide foundation for the maintenance of these relations.

Finally, the dissertation focuses on the *agency of verbal communication* within the two marginalized village-communities. Speech acts of verbal communication and the flow of narratives and stories reinforce and influence interpersonal relations and social groups in Küp and Tanda. This communication is based on the local *narrative knowledge* and on the emic epistemological models influencing the local processes of decision-making and the formation of public opinion. Verbal communication and narrative knowledge form a highly effective agency in managing social capital and business. By the examination of verbal communication and narrative knowledge my objective is to contribute to research methods employing verbalized data in analysing social structure.

## *The subject matter and the structure of the dissertation*

The dissertation focuses on the three key issues and consists of seven chapters. After the *foreword* the second chapter positions and introduces the *research locations*. I do not position the communities in a neutral geographical grid and I do not define them according to their ethnic composition, but concentrate on two other issues. First, I define the position of Kūp and Tanda *within the power relations of Russia* and then I examine the *emic system of coordination and self-positioning*. In this chapter I discuss the *epistemological problems* of contemporary anthropological fieldwork as well. The frequently one-sided interpretation of fieldwork as collecting data is not adequate to present scenarios of anthropological observation and I would rather define fieldwork as an exchange between the parties, providing peculiar behavioural patterns for the anthropologist, and a criticism towards analysing data collected during fieldwork.

Instead of a traditional survey on the history of previous research, the third chapter discusses the *historical development of the presence of the Russian state in Yakutia* as well as the *reasons and outcomes of the subordination of peripheral Siberian regions and peoples* in Russia and the Soviet Union. In this historical survey I focus in particular on the role that academic observations and data collections played in the subordination carried out with state financed expeditions and ethnographic research. Geographical, ethnographic and historical research expeditions collecting data about the “primitive tribes” of Siberia normally conveyed the interests of the Russian state, and therefore played a significant role in the subordination of people living in Siberia. Discussing interdependently the history of Siberia’s bureaucratic development and that of Siberian studies may help in clarifying the sources of widespread stereotypes about Siberian peoples. Therefore my argumentation focuses on *how* Siberian studies contributed to the *creation* of Siberia’s social and economic development rather than on what these studies *described*. The formation of the Siberian economic system based on taxation, the changes of rights to landed property and the change of administrative units provide the central problems of this historical survey.

The forth chapter provides general introduction to the *economic determinants and administrative status* of the two research locations, Kūp and Tanda, and makes an account on the subsequent socio-economic transitions of village communities. I illuminate the continuity in the local economy and society during the years of *collectivisation, centralisation and decollectivisation*. I describe how the heritage of the colonial tsarist taxation system and economy determined the aims and means of Soviet time collectivisation, and how the local processes of privatisation stemmed from the Soviet time collective and state farms. I conclude that the geographical and ecological determinants along with ethnically defined “traditional lifestyle” have only minor role in understanding these communities, because it is the state policies that primarily determine the economy of Kūp and Tanda rather than lifestyle and ethnicity. The chapter therefore concentrates on the major socio-economic transitions: the collectivisation, the centralisation and the decollectivisation. In this chapter I deliberately avoid the popular term “privatisation” when describing the changes during and after the perestroika, because the villagers actually did not receive any economically effective resources as private properties.

The fifth chapter discusses *the kinship, the neighbourhood, the friendship and the patron-client relationships* in the two communities. Instead of focusing on a monolith local social structure, I examine the functioning and everyday life of social relations. First I scrutinize the notions of kinship, friendship and neighbourhood and define the specific local interpretations of these concepts. By examining the ways these relationship-types are embedded in the local culture, I do not intend to create an emic system of socially defined relationships, I would rather illuminate the fact that these relationship types are only possibilities for establishing cooperation and emotional ties, and normally not all of these possibilities are exploited. Only the evocative and effective relations accumulate social capital and create local resources in the two village communities. Social relations are usually not balanced in K p and Tanda and thus individuals are positioned in a local web of patron-client relations. Patron-client relations not only form dyadic connections, but also establish a thickly interwoven fabric of trust, collaboration and dependency. This hierarchic network of patrons and clients depends heavily on and is enhanced by a local model of assessing human values and character traits.

Therefore the sixth chapter discusses the *local concepts of personhood and theories on the formation of personality*. Similarly to the results of a number of Siberian case studies, in K p and Tanda human character traits can be inherited from the ascendants and handed down to the descendants. Therefore the personality of one's ancestors has a great effect on the evaluation of his or her present human values and actions. Although the *inherited human character traits* do not mechanically and entirely determine the individual's actual personality, yet they are indelible. Consequently, local discourses about the acts of the ancestors have a significant role in the legitimisation of one's good or bad reputation, and the narrative assessment of one's current actions and behaviour is compared with narratives about the ancestors. Thus the local *evaluative social talk* is conditioned by stories about the ancestors. The relation between the ancestors' characters and the present evaluation and reputation of a person depends largely on the position, on the economic situation, and on the amount of accumulated social capital of the individual. This interdependency between the current status and the reputation works in rather different manner in the two village communities.

In K p only the descendants of the six largest descent groups possess such characterisation. Here the characterisation expresses complex human characters and can only be obtained by descent. For instance, one of the descent groups is considered to be sexually overheated, at the same time good at merchandising, another one is characterised as witty though rather bad-tempered. These characteristics are not fixed, and the more representatives of a descent group become influential and powerful in the community by having access to local resources and occupying leading positions in the community, the more the character's negative features are emphasised. In K p, consequently, the relative balance in the authority system between descent groups is guaranteed by an evaluative social talk about the human values of the descent groups. Discourses about descent-group character are always aware of a multiple audience (since villagers are affiliated to more than one descent group), and therefore it only rumples, but normally does not denigrate other people in public.

In Tanda, the network of nuclear families forms a more uniform context of the characterisation of descent groups, which in this village equals roughly the assessment of the symbolic value of surnames. In this context (where the genealogies of descent groups are not obviously observable for villagers) the characterisation is restricted to the mere fact whether bearers of the same surname are talented, gifted people or not. It occurs therefore that a man takes on the surname of his wife, or in the past, people paid to get baptised to have a different

surname. This system does not strive for balance, and each family intends only to support his surname's good reputation regardless of the actual changes in the distribution of the local leading positions. Furthermore, this system is rather imbalanced, since leaders have better chances and means to propagate the good reputation of their descent-groups, and therefore discarding weak minority opinion is a common phenomenon in Tanda's social talk. In compliance with the descent group character, one can inherit in Tanda and K p the character of his or her ethnic and local group as well, but these characters are of minor importance in the villages.

The seventh chapter focuses on the *local narrative knowledge* and on the *functioning of the evaluative social talk* in the two communities. Narrative knowledge is often opposed to rational knowledge and is based on the circulation, repetition and evocation of narratives. Hence it creates a specific system of argumentation, where firm knowledge is based on the ability to recall and employ narratives in aptly fitting situations rather than on strict causal connections. Narratives of everyday communication do not only establish norms, form judgements in the village communities, but also dominate and control local publicity. Consequently, the topics and the protagonists of the narratives along with the dominating voices in the public discourses represent the local power relations and trust networks. Nevertheless conflict, disagreement and incongruity in communicative situations cannot be equalled mechanically with interpersonal conflicts. On the contrary, contradicting and competing narratives often enhance one another and thus cooperate in the consolidation of the existing social relations and system of values. In this chapter narratives of *evaluative social talk* are under survey. These narratives focus primarily on the evaluation of the acts and personality of community members either present or absent in the communicative situation. Therefore I concentrate less on the textual meaning of the narratives, I rather understand them as illocutionary acts, since in constructing narrative knowledge both the configuration of the speech acts and the content have an important role.

With the help of case studies I examine various text types (humorous stories, legends, written family histories and gossip narratives) with regard to their contribution to the assessment of individuals. Authority systems of small scale communities rely heavily on rumour and gossip, and on a system of reputation created in an informal public agora. Narrative knowledge and evaluative social talk make an impact on the local authority systems in two different ways in K p and Tanda. Whereas in Tanda competitiveness in local communication can be observed, where narratives try to dominate publicity by overshadowing counter narratives, in K p one can detect a community aware of multiple audiences, where narratives knowledge does not form a monolith structure. As a result narrative knowledge and local publicity influence in different ways the local social structure and authority system in K p and Tanda.

## Conclusions

In the dissertation I theorize fieldwork data collected in K p and Tanda by understanding these villages as communities on the peripheries of postsocialist power relations. From this viewpoint social transition during collectivisation and decollectivisation did not transform an authentic society to a Soviet or to a Capitalist one, only enhanced the subordination of peoples living Siberia. Thus social transformations meant only subsequent stages in an attempt of the Russian state to change the economic and social configurations of Siberia according to its own interests. The subordination of village communities is especially apparent in the conditions of production. During the years of collectivisation the new economic units did not put an end to the tsarist economic system based on taxation, but transformed them into new units that preserved the main features of the previous one. Due to the unchanging marginality and subordination of Siberian village communities in the Russian and Soviet state, the permanence of production modes characterizes the process of decollectivisation as well.

In K p and Tanda community life can be described with the lack of (western type) civil society as well as with ineffectual state services, which contributes to the construction of strong informal networks. Therefore the local power relations rely on a thickly interwoven fabric of interpersonal relations. These relations (based on kinship, friendship and neighbourhood) provide social capital, which is the most important effective local resource for the villagers. The way social capital is managed in the two village communities is different. In Tanda social capital is more institutionalized, and informal relations are well embedded in the local institutions of the Russian state, leading to the hierarchization of relations. In K p the institutions of the state play only minor role in managing interpersonal relations, and therefore intra-community relations are more equal. As a result, patron-client relationships are more stable in Tanda than in K p.

The examination of the use of social capital contributes to the understanding of patron-client relationships in small scale communities. Social capital (in a context where the accumulation of other types of economically effective capital is hardly possible) has an immense importance in the formation of local economic strategies. During the analysis of fieldwork data, from the various ways of defining and classifying social capital, the one proposed by Robert Putnam provided me the most insight. The two major kinds of social capital suggested by Putnam, i.e. the *bridging* and the *bonding* social capital help in the characterization of the differences perceived in the two village communities under survey. In this chapter I argue that the bonding social capital does not obviously equal low social capital and it does not necessarily reproduce marginalization or deepen social inequality. Furthermore, the example of K p shows also that the dominance of bonding social capital does not inevitably constrain the community in obtaining economic resources, and is not a disadvantage for the villagers. Bonding (or exclusionary) social capital creates in K p *isolate social identity* and preserves *mutuality* and *reciprocity* within the community. This feature of K p's community strengthens trust and creates solidarity between villagers, but keeps out outsiders from the mobilizable interpersonal networks. As a result bonding social capital creates *horizontal* interpersonal relations maintained between equal parties, and thus patron-client relations cannot be consolidated for a long time.

In Tanda the dominance of the *bridging* (or inclusionary) social capital generates vertical social relations and steady patron-client ties. Bridging social capital opens up the community, because villagers strive to create connections and solidarity with non-villager outsiders as well. Thus villagers do not only need to legitimise their authority within the community but outside of the community as well. Local leaders (and potential patrons at the same time) are created by their ability to mediate between the villagers and external state bureaucrats. This way of accumulating social capital and functioning of patron-client relations entails the openness of information flow as well. Consequently Tanda's evaluative social talk is aware of the publicity outside the village-community and thus villagers can hardly conceal their secrets.

In Tanda the state institutions have an immense role in building social capital; therefore it is necessary to take into consideration the presence of *statist* social capital. In this community the social capital is deeply embedded in the local state institutions, and effective economic resources are nearly exclusively controlled by the state. Therefore patron-client relations have an outstanding importance *within* the state institutions and villagers can deserve authority and legitimisation in this realm. In these marginal state institutions one can perceive how hybridity and mimicry are present in a postsocialist context.

In both of the village communities the accumulation of social capital and the functioning of patron-client relations rely largely on the evaluative social talk. Local discourses create various relations between the narratives and the construction of knowledge about the inheritance of human character traits. Human authority, reputation and the inherited descent-group character are in connection with each other. Individuals inheriting good character traits have normally favourable reputation and have good chances to occupy leading positions in the community and to build out a circle of clientele. Hence narratives about the ascendants (informing about the potentially inheritable character traits) are embedded in the evaluative social talk, where the narrative assessment of the ancestors influences the present reputation of the descendants. The acts of villagers are evaluated and interpreted according to their descent group affiliations, and commentaries on similar acts differ profoundly on the ground of the inherited descent-group character of the actor.

Nevertheless, the Tanda and the K p models of descent-group character inheritance are dissimilar, due to the differences in the importance and role of descent groups within the village communities. This difference is particularly apparent in the dynamics of descent-group character. In Tanda descent-group characters are fairly stable and local leaders are able to support the good reputation of their own descent-group. In K p, descent-group characters change easily, and normally the more leaders of a descent group has in the village, the more the negative inherited character traits of that descent group are emphasised.

The analysis of the local evaluative social talks illuminates the fact that narrative knowledge cannot be simply opposed to rational decision making and referred to as *belief* or *surmise*. Narrative knowledge and rational knowledge jointly contribute to everyday decision making, forming locally valid epistemological systems. This epistemological system combines local and external values and concepts interdependently. Therefore it is the extent of using narrative and rational knowledge that makes difference between local epistemological systems.

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