

ISSN 1226-4490

*International
Journal of
Central
Asian Studies*

Volume 7 2002

**Editor in Chief
Choi Han-Woo**

Institute of Asian Culture and Development

Traditional Male and Female Uzbek Associations at the End of the XXth Century

Arifkhanova Z. Kh., Abdullaev U. S.

Institute of History, Academy of Sciences
of the Republic of Uzbekistan

Traditional male age associations (men's unions) in the Middle Asian region have an ancient history, wide area of dissemination and go back to the period of patriarchal tribal society. This social institution couldn't help attracting attention of explorers-ethnologists. It was reflected in the works of such authors as S.P. Tolstov, O.A. Suhareva, K.Sh.Shaniyazov, G.P. Snesareva, R.R.Rahimov, M.V. Sazonova, R.Y.Rassudova, O.B.Buriev, N.P. Lobacheva and others.¹⁾ S.P. Tolstov wrote that in the pre-Moslem Middle Asia "male clubs were widely spread and socially important phenomena".²⁾ He considered that the most deep roots of "secret male unions" inseparable from male clubs should be searched precisely in them.

¹⁾ Tolstov S.P. Drevniy Khorezm. M-L., 1948; Snesarev G.P. Traditsia mujskih soyuzov v eyo pozdneishem variante u narodov Srednei Azii // Poleviye issledovaniya Khorezmskoi ekspiditsii v 1958–1961 godah. Vip.7. M., 1963; Zadinina K.L. Perejitzki vozrastnih klassov u narodov Srednei Asii // Rodovoe obschestvo. Trudi Instituta etnografii. Novaya seriya. T. 14., M., 1951; Rahimov R.R. Mujskie obedineniya u uzbekov i tadjikov Ferganskoy dolini // Sotsialnaya istoria narodov Asii. M., 1975; Sazonova M.V. O jenskih vozrastnih grupah v Khorezme // Kratkoe sodержaniye dokladov Sredneasiatsko-Kavkazskih chteniy. Leningrad., 1987; Buriev O.B., Rasudova R.Y. Mujskie obedineniya i obschina uzbekov i tadjikov na rubeje XIX-XX v.v. // Kratkoe sodержaniye dokladov Sredneasiatsko-Kavkazskih chteniy. Leningrad, 1983; Lobachova N.P. Sem'ya i sverstniki (K voprosu o drevney polovozrostonoy gradatsii obschstva u narodov Srednei Asii i Kazakhstana) // Sovetskaya etnografiya, 1989, №5.

²⁾ S.P. Tolstov. Drevniy Khorezm M., 1948, p. 317.

At the end of the XIX- beginning of the XX centuries these traditional social associations were spread among local inhabitants in an altered form and were named differently. Uzbek and Tadjik people of Fergana valley and Tashkent oasis called them “gap” (a talk), “gashtak” (a turn), “jōra” (a friend, pal); Uzbeks from Khoresm “ziyofat” (entertainment).³⁾ Turkmen and Tadjik people had similar associations, called “Keshdek” and “Joroo”, respectively.

The basic functions of the associations (“gaps”) are as follows: an interesting spending of free time in the circle of friends of the same age, training of the traditional communication culture, ethics of national hospitality. Many researchers of the last years marked only an entertaining side of the associations of men, spending free time together. In ethnographic literature there was a conception of a “remnant character” of these institutions and misunderstanding of their essence and the meaning in the society. At the same time a number of scholars including S. P. Tolstov and G.P. Snesarev have defined them as one of the social institution of the society with an important public meaning.⁴⁾

In the past men of every *mahallya*⁵⁾ joined for three winter months for spending free time together. Groups usually included 20-40 persons. As a rule there were a few gaps corresponding to traditional gender-age hierarchy of the community in mahallya. Men were divided into three age classes: 1) young people at the age of 18-20 to 30-35 years, 2) mature men (35-40 to 50-55 years old), 3) old men (from 55 years and older). In Khorezm there were marked from four to seven age levels. Each of them had its own name.⁶⁾ At the same time, in some places of Fergana valley men’s meetings represented a union of

³⁾ Lobachova N.P. Op. cit.

⁴⁾ Tolstov S.P. Op. cit., p. 317; Snesarev G.P. Traditsia mujskih soyuzov v eyo pozdneishem variante u narodov Srednei Azii; Poleviye issledovaniya Khorezmskoi ekspiditsii v 1958 –1961 godah. M., 1963, Vip. 7, pp. 155-205.

⁵⁾ mahallya – neighbour’s territorial community in the city, town or village.

⁶⁾ Lobachova N.P. Sem’ya i sverstniki (K voprosu o drevney polovozrostonoy gradatsii obshchestva u narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana)// Sovetskaya etnografiya, 1989, №5.

mixed ages from 16 to 60 years (Gova, Kar-Yantak, Rushtak).⁷⁾ There was also a social gradation into elite gaps and gaps for a poor part of inhabitants. But the majority of gaps joined people of different professions and estates .

In winter time, when all the crop was gathered, the gaps had been held once time a week in the *mehmonhona*⁸⁾ of one of the members, in turn. A master of the house bore the treating expenses. Every gap had an elected leader (“jöraboshi”) and rules of participation. Violation was punished by different methods (fines, warnings) up to the expulsion. Also there was some kind of unwritten “code of law”, that controlled a home life of *mehmonhona* from the point of rules of behavior of its members inside it as well as outside.⁹⁾ There was also another form of spending free time – “tökmä”, when the men daily gathered at somebody’s place in the special rooms, allowed for this purpose. They brought provision prepared beforehand (according to everybody’s possibility) and everything was put into (“tökmok” – to pour out) a common stock. Men prepared food themselves, read “namaz” (a prayer) and religious books, talked, shared information, had a good time. They had stayed for a long time there. A married men returned on the eve of Friday, in some places on Wednesday (it was a market day). In some of such associations young people learned a trade. “Economic and social progress and failures of a union’s members and community as a whole were discussed here with great interest, youth was systematically taught household skills, norms of behavior in various situations”.¹⁰⁾ This had a great educative meaning for young men as they were accustomed to an independent life, got habits of neighbour relations. Inhabitants of mahallia willingly

⁷⁾ Rahimov R.R. Mujskie obedineniya u uzbekov i tadjikov Ferganskoy dolini// Sotsialnaya istoria narodov Asii. M., 1975, p. 37.

⁸⁾ mehmonhona - a sitting room in the house.

⁹⁾ Rahimov R.R. Op. cit., p. 40.

¹⁰⁾ Buriev O.B.; Rasudova R.Y. Op. cit., p. 13.

allowed a place for meetings (mehmonhona), not to let young people spend their time aside, but before the community's eyes.¹¹⁾

In the past provision were prepared beforehand, from autumn for holding men's meetings. Especially for this purpose there was chosen and fattened a bull or a ram, cooked a home-made horse sausage ("kazi"). An assortment of the food was fixed from the very beginning. Usually a meat soup and "osh" were cooked. Frequently, participants of the gap have prepared "norin" as a cool dish, which was a favorite dish of Uzbeks from Tashkent and Fergana oasis. In the gaps that joined not prosperous people only one dish had been cooked – "osh" (a pilaw). By traditions on feast completion, juraboshi took a little sum of money from everyone and together with a part of fare gave it to that member of association, at whose place they should have gathered for the next time.

On the period, when a well-developed system of social information haven't yet existed, the gaps were like centers of social life, where one could find out about all events in mahallya, in society, join to public life. The social associations and their juraboshi were of great prestige and influenced the leadership of mahallya, solution of important social problems, controlled the present life of inhabitants.

On the period of repressions of 30th years, ideological and religious oppressions, when people were arrested for reading "namaz" and religious literature it had become dangerous to gather in companies and organize gaps. Financial problems of the World War II period also influenced the gap's organization. However, men's meetings haven't stopped their existence and were widely spread in 50-60th years in an altered form.

In the Soviet time, when the "theory of remnants" predominated in ethnographic literature, many traditional institutions of Uzbek society were evaluated from the point of eurocentrism and male associations were considered to be a relic phenomenon that was supposed to become a thing of the past. On

¹¹⁾ An author's remark. Mahallya Obinazar, 1995.

the materials of specific field's researches ethnographs fixed a viability of these institutions, but they couldn't write about it as it contradicted official directions. In our article we are trying to make out this deficiency by revealing the functioning of this institution at the end of the XX century.

At present every mahallya has a gap where many traditions are reviving. On the contrary to the past time, present gaps are conducted all the year round. A form of treating was changed under the influence of the number of social and economic factors. It lost its clubbing (especially natural clubbing) character that was an echo of ancient times, when there was a communal property and the treating was a form of mutual hospitality.

The majority of gaps are associations of mahallya's neighbours. But also there appeared associations of men, working on the same enterprise and also meetings of friends, sometimes relatives. Mainly the meetings are organized in the houses of members in turn.¹²⁾ But sometimes a meal is conducted in the *chaihona* (a tea-room) – sometimes men club together to do it. We have registered the functioning of the gap among the leadership and activists of Mukimi mahallya, that is conducted in the very office of mahallya.¹³⁾

The male associations represent traditional non-formal unions. But their role in the social life of mahallya is noticeable. Somewhere the gap's leaders (*juraboshi*) become an assistances of mahallya committee's chairmen (*aksakals*). The aksakal brings his commissions and decisions to the notice of male association's members and demand their realization exactly through *juraboshi*. We have registered such a close connection of these institutions in the Kapa village (*kishlak*) of Andijan region.¹⁴⁾

Male associations as well as the others social associations of traditional society have their distinctive features such as a marked sensitivity to the hierarchical structure of social space. In

¹²⁾ Now equally with the term "gap" we use the term "utrish" (gathering).

¹³⁾ An author's remark. Mukimi Mahallya. Tashkent. 1998.

¹⁴⁾ An author's remark. Kapa kishlok of Andijan region. 1996.

the gaps everyone has his own rank corresponding to his position in the society. This is revealing in the order people take their seats at a table, in the relationships and roles that are distributed beforehand and assigned for a long time. An age hierarchy existing in the society and representing an echo of one of the constructions characteristic to the patriarchal society is rendered in the gaps.

At present every gap has its own governing body: a leader (juraboshi), two assistants. But now the head of the association doesn't have an unlimited power and indisputable authority as in the past. The main problems are solved collectively. Besides, many gaps have a treasurer, sometimes a cook who prepares two hot dishes. In some places this work is performed by the members of association in turn.

Relationships in the gaps are built on the democratic basis of equality of rights of all the association's members, but at the same time there are kept traditions of a special, respectful attitude to elders. This attitude is first of all reflected in the places of honor allotted for them at feasts. There were kept a system regulating a discipline and responsibility of members and also ascendancy measures – from warnings and fines to expulsion – for those who violate the rules.

The men's company gathers one time a month or a week in the house of one of the members or in chaihona. During all the day (if they gather in the morning) or evening between the preparation and taking of food the members of the meetings talk, share information, read book, play chess, *nardi*, organize "*askiya*" (a competition of wits), play musical instruments.

We have fixed one gap in Yangiobod mahallia of Taskent city,¹⁵⁾ where information part includes not only discussion of actual political and international problems, but making some kind of reports on recent home and international events. They are made by the gap's members themselves (there are many teachers and lecturers in the gaps). The theme of information and conversation

¹⁵⁾ An author's remark. Yangiobod mahallia, Taskent. 1997.

is selected beforehand. At present, when there exist new channels of information receipt, the function of gaps is not lost as they represent a form of vivid communication and discussion of the process happening in the society. They give to every member a feeling of solidarity and unity. Gaps keep national forms and color of communication, national customs best of all.

At the present stage a gender-age gradation is kept in the organization of the gaps. There are gaps for young people, men of middle and elder age. All these illustrate that a gender-age hierarchy in society still possesses a marked stability. Thus, in Mindon kishlak of Fergana region there function three types of men's meetings corresponding to different social-age classes. Young people are joined in "*shanbalik*" unions that gather on Saturdays (*Shanba*) once a week or two weeks. In Mindon 10 shanbalik function from late autumn till early spring. Elder men, heads of families (from 35 to 55 years) organize gaps. They gather few times a week.

Contrary to youth unions which have a friendly base, gaps play a marked public role by realizing functions of social life regulator (they discuss mahallia affairs, conflicts between inhabitants, establish an order of rites' realization etc.). A circle of old men has its own unions, meetings which are often carried out in chaihona or mosque. They don't have their own name.¹⁶⁾

One can meet gaps where men of different generations participate. More often it is connected with the fact that old people take to the company their children, trying to join them to a good society. There exist a tradition when instead of a dead father his son is invited into the gap. Besides, young people, not being the gap's members, frequently present at them in the quality of assistants. Thus, gaps play a definite role in the socialization of personality by joining young people to the traditions and customs, to ethnic norms of traditional society.

The majority of the gaps represents united organizations that exist for many years and have their own traditions, system of

¹⁶⁾ An author's remark. Mindon kishlak. 1994.

relationships not only during a meeting but in everyday life, too. They are united not only by the joint meal but by participation in solution of a number of vital problems, joint labour (*hashar*). In essence these associations unite, rally neighbours, relatives and consolidate social positions of participants in the society. During a wedding the members of one gap help the master by active participation in the preparation of all the stages of this celebration. They come to help during hashar, support their friends in case somebody dies in their families, visit them during illness etc.¹⁷⁾ Members of the gaps collect little sum of money that is used for their needs. But frequently money is given to the member who has big expenses connected with the rites' realization. Thus, in one of the gaps of Kapa kishlak of Andijan region these means are lend or sometimes given without compensation to the member whose relative has suddenly died or some kind of trouble happened to him.¹⁸⁾

In the number of male associations there exist a tradition of spending rest jointly or going for a trip to holy places, excursions to historical monuments, joint realization of a number of national and religious rites.¹⁹⁾

It's necessary to mark one more important aspect of these social associations' activity – it is realizing of communal forms of social control, functions of a regulator of public opinion. The gaps' members accept responsibility for successful functioning of association as their personal task; at the same time each member shares responsibility for his own acts with association which takes the responsibility for its members. This leads to establishment of the control over activity of all the gap members. The merging of each member and association is so close that every individual answers for his actions not to himself but to the group and evaluates his actions from its positions. All the events in mahallya are discussed in the gaps, especially an order of rites' realization,

¹⁷⁾ An author's remark. Mindon kishlak and mahallya of Tashkent city. 1998.

¹⁸⁾ An author's remark. Kapa kishlak. Andijan region. 1997.

¹⁹⁾ An author's remark. Khafiz Kuhaki mahallya Tashkent. 1998.

behavior of the families and people. A public opinion, which frequently becomes a point of view of the whole mahallya, is formed and discussed here. The gaps members are responsible for their association and friends, value opinion of the society and seek not to injure the authority of his group. Every association has its reputation which is forming for years. That is why good associations are trying to keep it. Usually they attract a large amount of interested persons.

Both in the past and at present “one of the functions of male associations was upbringing of young people performed by the members of elder age levels.”²⁰⁾ By the gap-membership one can define what kind of education a man, especially of young age, has received. Because on all stages of their existence male associations represented not only a form of communication and spending free time, but a way of upbringing and transference of ethnic traditions, ethics of communication and hospitality.

Together with many positive moments in 70th years in the gaps there appeared some objectionable phenomena, which hadn't been characteristic to the rules of gaps' organization before. Frequently gaps were come to excessively lavish entertainment with drinks. Such positive aspects as reading books, interesting conversations began to come out. Gaps of such form were condemned by an older generation.²¹⁾

At present the gender-age gradation begins to break. There appeared family gaps where gather men with their wives. They were began as companies of classmates or students and gradually every married man took to the meal his wife. These gaps exist on the basis of a common rule, but they can be met rather seldom.²²⁾

²⁰⁾ Lobacheva N.P. Brak // *Semeyniy bit u narodov SSSR*. M. 1990, p. 453.

²¹⁾ An author's remark. *Aloka mahallya*. Tashkent. 1996.

²²⁾ An author's remark. *Samarkand darvoza mahallya*. Tashkent. 1995.

In the past female gaps were conducted only among well-off groups of people. Their existence was marked by ethnographs among Uzbeks of Khorezm²³⁾ and in Bukhara oasis.²⁴⁾

Women cooked meal for male meetings. Close relatives, neighbours who, on the women's side, organized meal with songs and dances, gathered for a gap service. As R.R.Rahimov writes, "each gaplash" corresponded to "female gaplash".²⁵⁾ Female gaps were widely spread in 60-70th years. These were women's associations within a mahallia. An age gradation is also kept here. In every mahallia there exist female associations for women of elder and middle age and also for young ones, mainly for daughters-in-law of that mahallia.²⁶⁾ At present there are widely spread gaps corresponding not only to territorial, but to kindred sign among close relatives, where usually the main role of a leader belongs to a mother-in-law or to any elderly kinswoman. Her daughters-in-law form a part of such gaps. On the meetings women take their children in order to accustom them to such form of leisure from the early childhood. As the majority of women works in the state-owned sector, they organize professional associations by joining together working people. Sometimes one and the same woman can take part in several gaps organized according to territorial, kindred and professional principle.

There also exist an order of meetings' organization among the women. But they are always conducted in the house of one of them. On the opposite to male associations women often bring a considerable sum of money to the mistress of the house. Money is intended for a costly thing or some batch in *dastarhan*. Female feasts are distinguished by a special emotionality and accompanied by songs, dances, merry jokes. On their meetings they discuss present events in mahallia, city and also they help

²³⁾ Sazonova M.V. O jenskih vozrastnih grupah v Yujnom Khorezme // *Kratkoe soderjaniye dokladov sredneaziatsko-kavkazskih chteniy*. Leningrad, 1978. p. 12.

²⁴⁾ Lobacheva N.P. Brak. p. 453.

²⁵⁾ Lobacheva, op. cit., p. 43.

²⁶⁾ An author's remark. Mindon kishlak. 1993.

each other by giving advice in solution of a number of everyday problems such as preparation for a coming wedding, upbringing of children. In “Ukchi” mahallia of Tashkent city, as we were told by the villager, Tuhfahon Ahmedova, the women of one gap have arranged about helping each other in supervision the children, in their moral upbringing. Each of them has rights and should reprove a friend’s child if he behaves badly, should look after him in difficult situations when parents are absent.²⁷⁾

Social-economic changes in 90th years were accompanied by a social polarization of society. In such conditions for a definite part of inhabitants it became difficult to organize *utrish*, in a number of mahallia women refused from collecting money for gaps and sometimes from the gaps themselves. The majority of inhabitants considerably reduced an assortment of the meal, i.e. expences for the gaps. At the same time well-off women sometimes organize *utrish* at a cafe, not at home. In a number of cases they club together to pay for the meal. It’s hard to forecast how these female meetings will be developed then. But now it’s clear that their outside organization facilitates their realization to women, but it is inaccessible to the majority of them and doesn’t further the conservation of traditional norms of the gaps. It appears that in future the gaps where women would satisfy their needs in interesting and emotive communication at a frugal meal will become very popular.

In 90th years there happened religious revival and return of elder and middle generations to the sphere of religion. This caused some changes in female associations, especially among the women of elder and middle age. In some places, instead of merry gatherings, they began to conduct “*ilm-maorif*”.²⁸⁾ Daily women gather in the house of one of the members, prepare a frugal meal, study Arabic script, read religious books, listen to the lecturers. In some places *ilm-maorif* lasts from 9 o’clock in the morning till 5 in the evening. Among women of middle and elder generation

²⁷⁾ An author’s remark. Ukchi mahallia. Tashkent. 1999.

²⁸⁾ Ilm-maorifat – education, enlightenment, in this case – religious.

there exist another forms of communication: these are realization of religious rites: *mushkul-kushod*²⁹⁾, *movlud*³⁰⁾, and *bibisheshanbe*³¹⁾, which lately regularly are realized by women in mahallia. They conduct not only all the prescribed religious rites, but have a possibility to communicate.³²⁾ On the period of existence of many unsolved general and personal problems, women don't withdraw into her family circle, but look for a calm in communication in the moral support of society. Thus, an old Uzbek tradition of joint spending of free time didn't lose its meaning in nowadays. By keeping the rational part of this ancient custom people had developed this tradition, enriched it with new forms, rites, rituals. As in the past, at present gaps are traditional informal male and female associations which are the part of present way of Uzbek life. They realize a number of important functions such as exchange of information, discussion of important social and domestic problems, giving a life experience, knowledge of socio-normative culture to young people, developing of traditional ethics of hospitality.

²⁹⁾ Mushkul-kushod – a rite directed on solution of difficult situations.

³⁰⁾ Movlyu – a birthday of prophet Muhammad.

³¹⁾ Bibisheshanba – a lady, solving difficult problems.

³²⁾ An authors' remark on kishlaks of Andijan region, and Tashkent city. 1997.