

The monetization of social celebrations in rural Kyrgyzstan: on the uses of hashish money

Gulzat Botoeva*

Sociology Department, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

This article focuses on the embeddedness of hashish production in the local economy of Toolu, a village in Kyrgyzstan. It explores how transformations in social relationships and the monetization of gift giving put constant pressure on families to find cash in a semi-subsistence agricultural economy. Although not produced on an industrial scale in the community, hashish is used as a cash crop in times of deficit. Based on a mixed-methods study combining ethnographic fieldwork with survey data, I show how the hashish economy is intertwined with different forms of reciprocal relationships based on gift-giving practices and the monetization of social relationships. In doing so, I illustrate how the hashish economy is embedded in local livelihoods and shapes emerging forms of economic morality in Kyrgyz society.

Keywords: drug production; hashish economy; monetization of gift giving; gift-giving practices; Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

This article focuses on the embeddedness of hashish production in the local economy of Toolu, a village in Kyrgyzstan.¹ I explore how transformations in social relationships and the monetization of gift giving put constant pressure on families to find cash in a semi-subsistence agricultural economy. Although not produced on an industrial scale in the community, hashish is used as a cash crop and hence not only provides a supply of cash but also facilitates the maintenance of social security networks among local residents.

My study departs from other research on drug markets in Central Asia, which mainly focus on issues of Islamic extremism and violence that undermine the security of Central Asian states (Cornell and Swanström 2006; Engvall 2006; Makarenko 2002), presenting illegal drug markets as operating within the binary terms of ‘black and white’ or ‘good and evil’, in contrast with the legitimate activities of ‘law-abiding citizens’. However, in examining the case of Bolivian coca production, Sanabria (2004) argues that it is impossible to disentangle the drug war matrix from the means of production. In doing so, he claims that the war’s rationale is fundamentally flawed. This is in keeping with the critique that drug markets are uniquely positioned and embedded in the local societies and economies in which they operate. The existence of small-scale private drug markets that operate according to their own internal rules, and do not necessarily follow the ways in which the industrialized type of drug markets precipitate violence, nor are linked with organized criminal groups which use drug money to fund their terrorist activities, provides the evidence for such a critique (Potter 2010; Sandberg 2012). While not seeking to justify the uniqueness of the Kyrgyz case in relation to these international studies, my findings reflect the latter examples, which claim that all drug economies should be understood in their local context

*The author is now at the Department of Social Sciences, University of Roehampton, London, UK. Email: botoevag@gmail.com

and therefore do not automatically pose an external threat to law and order. In this paper, I present a nuanced analysis of how small-scale hashish production and circulation of illicit commodities in Toolu are intertwined with the practices of social support and informal crediting.

Social networks and gift-giving practices are being transformed by the prevalence of hashish as cash. My analysis will focus specifically on how social celebrations (or *tois*) are being shaped by this new economic activity. In turn, I examine how factors such as status, prestige and an emergent sense of national identity affect the involvement of various strata of society in *tois*.

I explore below the way in which hashish production reconfigures social networking practices and how it plays an important role in maintaining reciprocal relationships between families in Toolu. While agricultural activities do not provide adequate income, social celebrations play an important role in family lives, and many need an extra source of income to take part in such activities. In particular, increased spending on social celebrations in the last 20 years has created challenges for family budgets. *Tois* help families play a part in the lives of their relatives and friends and celebrate important milestones. They are also used as a source of social and economic support in times of need. Here we can see that although monetized gifts create barriers of entry for some poor families, social networks still retain some forms of support for those who are able to secure their membership. Hashish, therefore, is used by some families as a means of retaining membership in social networks.

The article proceeds with a note on the fieldwork and methodology, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework. I will also describe how hashish is produced and who is involved in this illegal activity in Toolu, before finally contextualizing this through a discussion of social celebrations and the recent transformations of social relationships due to monetization of gift-giving practices.

Methodology

The paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Toolu, a village located in Issyk-Kul *oblast* in Kyrgyzstan. Toolu has around 4000 inhabitants, who are mainly occupied with agricultural labour, cultivating their land with wheat, barley and potatoes and breeding various livestock such as sheep, cows, goats and horses.

The research is a mixed-method study, based on 64 semi-structured in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations of livelihood strategies, as well as a survey 147 households. Overall, it took nine months to conduct my fieldwork, visiting the village on two separate occasions: July–December 2009, and July–September 2010. All interviews were conducted in the Kyrgyz language. During the fieldwork I was able to collect a diverse range of interviews with both men and women. However, due to the gendered nature of the fieldwork (here I mean my own status and positionality as a female researcher), participant observation was mainly possible with women. This is in turn affected the type of data that was collected, as my main observations of social networking happened to be among women.

In an ethnographic study, having a gatekeeper, especially one with knowledge of the illegal activities that people try to hide from outsiders, is an important aspect not only of successful entrance to the community but also in building a rapport with participants (Adler 1985; Dwyer 2009; Jacobs 1998). After two weeks in the region, to which I gained access through Ainura,² a local English teacher who used to be an old friend of a colleague and lived in Ak-Suu *raion*, I met her relative Aikan, who lived in Toolu. After a few successful interviews with Aikan and some of her friends, I asked Aikan if I could stay in her place to continue my study in Toolu. She agreed to give me space in her house and also assist with making introductions. She was thirty-three years old, with four children, and worked topping up mobile phones and selling gas.

My choice of location was determined by a broader set of questions. Rather than exploring an illegal act in isolation, I was attempting to understand how a community negotiated the production of a drug considered illegal by the state. The Tyup region was among two other regions in Issyk-Kul *oblast* with large areas of wild-growing cannabis plants and a high involvement of local people in the drug-making process (Zelichenko 2003). Informally, the region is also known for its potent cannabis, which grows more abundantly than in other parts of Kyrgyzstan. It was identified in 1999 as one of the regions with large fields of wild-growing cannabis plants (Zelichenko 2003). Hashish and marijuana were made for sale in this region during Soviet times, but mostly by underground groups (Djakishev 2004; Musin 1988).³ The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 entailed the increased involvement of previously fully employed *kolkhoz* (collective farm) and *sovkhos* (state collective farm) workers from Kyrgyz communities in hashish making. In the 2000s, hashish making entered everyday conversation and practice in the village. Although not all families were involved in this illegal activity, by the end of 2009 some of the local men and women in their twenties and thirties produced hashish on a regular basis.

Initially, I started going around Toolu with Aikan, and she introduced me to her friends and relatives. To meet more people and to learn about community life, I also started following Aikan to different gatherings and participating in social celebrations, which helped me in gradually becoming accepted by her network of friends and relatives. I attended many significant and informal social gatherings with her: commemoration parties, funerals, a parent-teacher association meeting, and the opening of a mosque in the village, which brought the whole village together in a formal celebration. By the second year, women who usually saw me in their *sherine*⁴ gatherings started talking about including me as part of their network. I felt at the beginning that they were joking, as this was subsequently repeated at numerous gatherings I realized that they were serious. However, I could not stay permanently within their circle of *sherines* as I was supposed to finish my fieldwork in two months at that time. This acceptance into the network of friends and relatives of Aikan meant that people could trust me since there were many occasions when they discussed hashish making openly without hesitation. Such gatherings served an important role in creating a space for sharing the latest news and gossip. During the summer, the militia would make frequent visits to the villages and fields, and on many such occasions women would share warnings about their presence in the village. They would also get information on who was collecting hashish for drug dealers and for how much someone could sell hashish at that moment.

Some relationships that started with the help of Aikan grew stronger during the second field-trip, in 2010. For instance, our friendly relationship with Jamilya, initiated during an interview in summer 2009, was followed by many informal conversations in her and her friends' houses. Jamilya was also thirty-three, with four children. She was one of the women who regularly made hashish resin from cannabis plants and therefore was able to take me to the fields to see where and how hashish was cropped. This relationship with Jamilya, being in her network of hashish-making friends and observing them in the field, allowed me to gain even greater rapport with them, as they believed that I was not related to law enforcement.

However, gaining trust among the people in Toolu was not an easy process. As the militia tried to learn about when and where sale transactions happened and started using informants by promising to free them for full cooperation, people did not talk openly about their illegal activities with strangers or newcomers. Especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, some assumed that I worked for the militia by collecting information for them. Subsequently, I convinced my participants that I was conducting sociological research as part of my doctoral studies at a university in the UK. This helped ease the tension, as most interviewees doubted that I would be affiliated with law enforcement while studying abroad. On the other hand, the same fact made some people refuse to talk about hashish as it would create a negative image abroad, not only of the region

but also of the country as a whole. In such cases I tried to explain that my goal was not to present them as criminals but rather, as a researcher, to understand the socio-cultural conditions under which hashish production became widespread in the community.

The survey was used as a follow-up to the ethnographic fieldwork and served two functions: firstly, to test some of the observations developed during fieldwork concerning the changes in reciprocal relationships between families and monetization of social relationships among rich and poor families in Toolu; and secondly, to provide a broader picture of the semi-subsistence-oriented rural economy. In the survey design, the household was taken as the unit of analysis. With the help of Aikan and Jamilya, I made a map of the village and counted all the households. To find the total number of households, based on local understandings of the term, I counted it as one household when a few generations and families were sharing not only the house but also household assets and responsibilities. The total number of households at that time was 300. In the survey I covered half of the households in the village by interviewing one adult person from each of them. The survey covered questions related to the livelihoods of households, live-stock and land assets they owned, and use of formal and informal microcredits. None of the survey questions related to hashish production, as one would be unlikely to receive any answer to such questions in a formal, structured interview.

Market and moral economies

The debates on moral and market economies and their effects on social structures provide a useful framework for analyzing the transformations of social relationships in Toolu. The mainstream academic discussion on moral and market economies suggests that they exist in a dichotomous position to each other. Although the free market economy was considered to have a civilizing effect, with the self-interest of every individual being counter-checked by other members of society (Smith 1986), the proponents of the moral economy were highly critical of market economy principles. They argued that a free and self-regulated market economy had been allowed to strip away forms of protection for the poorest and weakest that were based on ideas of justice and traditional values of support (Scott 1977, 1985; Thompson 1991a). This approach to the moral economy emphasizes the importance and endurance of relations between people which are not purely determined by self-interest but based on the values of support and reciprocity, which enable the sharing of resources within the community through reciprocal exchange (Polanyi 1944; Scott 1985; Thompson 1991a, 1991b).

In the post-Soviet space, the implementation of neoliberal policies saw a return of Polanyi's critique of the disembedding nature of market economies. Some studies revealed that with the marketization of society, the social networks of 'poor groups' shrank and included only their close relatives, who in most cases held the same social position as them (Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004; Werner 1997, 1998a, 1998c, 2000). The networks were based on how well someone invested in relationships, contributing with gifts, money and physical labour in feasts. The increasing inequality was due to the monetization of some forms of relationships among the rural population, based on the material success and economic capital of some of the families (Satybaldieva 2010).

Though influential, this dichotomous approach to market and moral economies has been questioned in more recent scholarship. It was argued that market economies are also embedded in the social structures of societies in which they exist (Granovetter 1985). Markets and moral economies can exist continually, intertwining and blending with each other (Hass 2011; Zelizer 1978, 1989, 1997, 2005). Following the view that markets can also be considered as moral (Booth 1994), instead of glorifying gift-exchange-based societies, this approach proposed that market economies are based on different but still moral grounds (Browne and Milgram 2008). In this

way, the moral motivations of reciprocity and support are not always neglected in market economies, and markets can even develop further through grounding themselves in local moralities (Browne and Milgram 2008). For instance, the study conducted by Sanghera and his colleagues in Kyrgyzstan was able to show that, despite the marketization of economy and society, close family members considered it important to treat each other with respect and dignity despite their level of material well-being and inability to reciprocate. Giving to and supporting family members without the expectation that it be reciprocated still existed (Sanghera, Ablezova, and Botoeva 2011).

Some studies on illegal-drug-producing communities in developing countries also brought up discussion of how drug markets brought some changes into the way that the local communities used to operate. Some reported that drug production as part of the market economy introduced a wage-labour system into the local system of social relations based on gift giving and reciprocity among Bolivian coca producers (Sanabria 1993, 2004). However, instead of suggesting that reciprocal relationships were replaced by wage labour, Sanabria argued that both forms were present at the same time and were used interchangeably. A more recent study, conducted in Bolivia among coca growers, suggests that reciprocal relationships between drug producers become infused with market principles (Pellegrini 2013). Coca producers use reciprocal labour to help each other with harvesting, while some, more busy and wealthier farmers tend to pay someone else to fulfil their obligation to return the help.

This discussion of moral and market economies is important in capturing the transformation of social relationships between families in Toolu and locating the hashish economy within these local dynamics. In what follows, I will discuss the importance of social celebrations (*tois*) in creating and maintaining social security networks, followed by an analysis of how social networks are being transformed through the monetization of gifts.

Hashish production

The neoliberal reforms of structural adjustment that took place throughout the 1990s promoted freedom of markets and the creation of entrepreneurial and competitive conditions for every individual. In reality, they had starkly different and unevenly distributed results.

Market economy reforms in the agricultural sphere in Kyrgyzstan had the opposite of the intended effect and turned most farming activities into semi-subsistence ones. In Toolu, as in other villages located in the agricultural regions of Kyrgyzstan, land and many other state assets were privatized in the mid-1990s. Five-hundred and seventy-six state and collective farms distributed their arable land and non-land assets to all farm residents and farm employees throughout the country (Abdurasulov 2009; Bloch 2004). During the privatization, the population of Toolu received 0.78 hectares of land per person. With small shares of land as their main means of production, many farmers produced agricultural products mainly for their own consumption and only a small surplus for the market, becoming more subsistence-oriented in their agricultural activities (Gleason 2003).

Only a tiny minority of well-off families, who owned large fields (30–50 hectares), full machinery and large herds of livestock (around 300 sheep, 30–40 cows and 20 horses), were able to produce a surplus and generate cash. Although also a minority in the community, the poorer members could not cultivate most of their land and so rented it out (or lost ownership completely), or did not own much livestock (no livestock or one cow and a few sheep) and had to find other ways to generate income. Even the ‘average’ households, as many families preferred to call themselves, were not able to produce much surplus for the market as their land, usually 3–5 hectares, was enough only to harvest mainly for their own consumption. They consumed their wheat and potatoes and sold some of their harvest on the market. Usually their livestock, around 20–30

sheep and 3–4 cows, could generate some good cash. Sheep and calves could be sold at the Kara-Kol *bazaar* (market); cow's milk could be sold to dairy factories.

A few families were able to earn money through selling petrol for cars, topping up phones and selling food and clothes in small shops opened up in their houses. A few men worked as taxi drivers. But these activities were restricted to well-off families that had some capital and most importantly cars, to be able to transport goods and people. Working as a builder on an occasional basis, a man might earn two to three thousand som (£28–42) per month, or even less. Sewing one *töshök* (a traditional mattress for sitting), which requires one or two days of labour, a woman can earn 100 som (£1.4). One formal source of employment – the local school – paid a salary of around 2600–2800 som (£37–40) per month. Salaries were similar in the local administration.

Due to the low level of local wages and earnings and the semi-subsistence-oriented agricultural economy, families in Toolu were in a permanent state of deficit. In particular, the summer months were the hardest time to find any cash, as harvests were collected only in autumn. Therefore, making hashish coincided with the time when cash was in absolute deficit in the village and took its niche in the local economy. Usually men were said to be able to make on average three to five matchboxes of hashish (a small matchbox, called *korobochka*, works as a measuring unit for hashish) in one day, which would earn them 1200–2000 som (£17–28). Although women were usually said to be able to make less hashish than men, from a half a matchbox to three maximum a day, as they would not travel far from the village so as to keep up with childcare and cooking, they could make comparatively more money with hashish than through other activities. Making hashish, women could earn at least 200 som (£2.8) in a few hours.

It is difficult to know the exact number of people involved in hashish production due to the hidden nature of production and trade. A rough estimate by some informers suggests that around 100 men (usually going around with their horses) could be involved in hashish making on a usual summer day. However, hashish makers would not usually go to the fields in big groups; they made it from wild-growing cannabis plants, by rubbing the upper leaves between their palms. This meant that they needed to search for cannabis plants and travel from one field to another. However, on some occasions when militia representatives tried to catch them, instead of hiding the men went onto the hills, which gave a good indication of roughly how many were making hashish that day. According to some interviewees, it was one of the new strategies hashish-making men developed as the militia would not want to confront such large numbers of men.

Hashish was mostly sold in the vicinity of the village, as there were dealers that came to buy. Most of the drug dealers were from outside the region but with some connections among the local population.⁵ In the 1990s, drug dealers would come during the daytime and ask around about who was selling hashish. However, with tightened controls since the mid-2000s and a few arrests made by the militia during the sale of hashish, they began to visit only specific middlemen and women at a certain time, usually at night. The middlemen and women usually collected hashish for the drug dealers from the local hashish makers or asked them to bring their drugs to a certain place at a certain time. The dealers paid the middlemen and women, who in turn distributed the money to the hashish makers. For their role of connecting the two they were able to take a cut of the money, usually around 50 som from each matchbox of hashish.

Hashish making is not without risk. People who make it could be caught by militia officers in the fields, travelling on horses or walking down the hills, and during the sale to the dealers. Usually the militia used to arrive in unmarked cars and civilian clothes so that people would not be able to identify them as militia representatives. When the militia saw people near the fields they stopped them and searched for drugs. Those who were caught mostly tried to negotiate a bribe with the militia. In most cases they were successful – they were told how much money their relatives should bring to the car at a certain time, normally no more than two or three

hours after they were caught. If the relatives were able and willing to pay the requested sum of cash, then the person caught and held by the militia in the car would be released. The official papers that had been filled out by the militia officers would be destroyed so that the case would no longer stand. In some rare circumstances houses and sheds could be searched for hidden drugs based on a tip provided by villagers, who had themselves been caught by the militia and promised to be released with no charges if they fully cooperated. Such cases, however, occurred rarely. Usually people were able to bribe the militia and be released with no charges. The amount of the bribe varied from a few hundred to a few thousand som, depending on how much drugs they were caught in possession of and whether they were involved in a sale at that time. This is justified by militia officers by saying that there is a difference between being caught with small amounts of drugs that could be qualified as for personal use, which is dealt with in an administrative code, and being caught with bigger amounts of drugs during a transaction, which is dealt with a criminal code. Only on the rare occasions when people were not able to make a bribe were their cases officially registered in the local militia office. Such people either did not have good connections with the militia, or could not find the money on short notice. Some would be charged administrative fines as ‘hashish smokers’ found with a small amount of drugs in their possession, though most hashish makers did not use their own drugs due to local social control over the use of hashish. When people were caught with larger amounts of drugs, and especially during a transaction, this would be regarded as a felony and usually would be fined, in addition to suspended sentences by courts.

Hashish making in the region is an interesting story of how an activity which had been morally condemned by local people just over 20 years ago became less stigmatized despite remaining illegal. My respondents talked about hashish making as their work and hashish money as crucial in staying afloat and tackling poverty. However, similarly to what Zelizer (1997) argued about the social meaning of money, some people in Toolu believed that hashish money was tainted. During my fieldwork I heard people say ‘*nashanyyn tubu jaman* (hashish is bad)’, meaning ‘hashish does not lead to anything good’, or ‘what goes around comes around’ in Kyrgyz. Some believed that profits from selling hashish were not ‘clean’. This has some similarities to ‘evil’ money in Kenya, which was earned through selling cannabis, tobacco and land, as it was perceived as betrayal of ancestors, as opposed to ‘good’ money received from sale of other agricultural products (Shipton 1984). ‘Evil’ money and various implications associated with it, such as a curse laid on the entire lineage of a person, did not stop farmers from engaging in these illicit practices. When such acts became widespread, the ceremony of money cleansing was sought (Shipton 1989). Therefore we see aspects of ‘bitter money’ practices in Toolu, similar to those in Kenya, although not enacted as thoroughly. Even though there was a uniform belief that hashish money could not be separated from the powerful spirits of the cannabis plant, the effects of using hashish money varied. People thought that everybody should try to make hashish and see the results, as it was out of human control. For some, hashish money did not help build wealth, but for others it did. Therefore, despite the fact that hashish money had some bitterness in it, it did not require cleansing through rituals, nor it was considered dangerous to use for funding social celebrations or bridewealth as in Kenya.

Instead, neutralizing strategies were developed to normalize hashish making among the local residents. My respondents often referred to hashish making as their form of work, as opposed to crime, implying self-reliance as opposed to dependence. Another strategy was to separate hashish production from the use of hashish through informal control of community members. The local discourse was that nobody took any drugs in the community. Indeed, most of the adult men and women did not use their own hashish, apart from a small number of young men in their early twenties who smoked hashish in secret as they did not want to be condemned by the community. The majority preferred to spend their hashish earnings on vodka, which was a staple of most

social occasions in Kyrgyzstan. This strategy of separating hashish making from hashish smoking allowed the community to distance themselves from hashish users. Still, making too much hashish and relying only on hashish money as the main means of income was perceived as dangerous. This money was thought to either disappear quickly or not lead to any substantive wealth, in contrast to income that someone could earn from selling livestock, wheat or potatoes. If someone is making too much hashish, people would on the contrary denounce their activity and reiterate the belief that hashish is not going to make anyone rich. It was also believed that greedy hashish makers will be punished in the end, in the form of the payment of a large bribe to police, or some other unexpected expense.

Social celebrations

In addition to providing necessary cash for everyday use and sustaining their agricultural activities (Botoeva 2014), hashish money was also used by many families as a means of maintaining their participation in local celebrations. In the survey, participating in social celebrations was identified as one of the main lines of household spending, together with buying food and clothes. In my survey, buying food was mentioned by 29%, buying clothes by 24%, and taking part in social celebrations by 23% of households as their main lines of spending.

The use of hashish money in local festivities started first through its use as a substitute gift during the 1990s, when instead of bringing their contribution in the form of livestock, people gave a few *korobochka* of hashish, whispering to the host that it was their *kara-koi* (black sheep), replacing the traditional gift of sheep. Later, with greater monetization of gifts, hashish money instead of hashish itself was used for hosting the *toi*, and as a form of contribution. So, why did families in Toolu have to use an illegal drug for *tois*?

Primarily this was because social celebrations require spending money that most average and poor families do not have readily available in their budgets. The case of Sairakul, who was preparing for a *toi* to give her daughter's dowry, is illustrative of such a situation. The family had already devoted a cow and a sheep for the purposes of this *toi*, with 50,000 som (£714) in outstanding expenses. As their harvest was not large, Sairakul's family tried to find different ways of covering all the expenses.⁶ Hashish money was earmarked for her daughter's clothes, as her three sons (who were in their early and late twenties) were making hashish that summer. Money from the potato harvest was earmarked for gifts for their in-laws and food expenses. Contributions of 1000 som (£14) and clothes from her nine siblings would help complete the gifts to the in-laws. Thus, families needed extra cash not only for everyday needs but also for holding celebrations and taking part in gift-exchange practices.

On numerous occasions I heard that hashish money helped families prepare gifts and monetary contributions for big celebrations and small *sherine* gatherings. Jamilya, for instance, used her hashish money for a wedding gift and new clothes for her husband and daughter. However, the money proved not enough for her to attend the wedding herself, so it was decided that her husband should represent her. Although her family cultivated two and a half hectares of land and owned livestock (a horse, 4 bulls, 2 cows, and 15 sheep) and considered themselves an 'average' family, Jamilya tried to make hashish on an everyday basis. Her main goal in making hashish was to earn a little money that could be used for everyday needs, and for participation in social rituals. The money from livestock and wheat and potato harvests was earmarked for other, bigger expenses.

In 2010, Meerim *eje*,⁷ who was a widow of several years and bringing up her six children by herself, was also preparing for her first daughter to get married. She decided that her small house needed at least some cosmetic renovations in order that she did not feel too ashamed when hosting guests. Additionally, she needed money for the small celebration when her daughter and the

groom would arrive from the capital city, Bishkek. As she did not own any livestock and was cultivating a very small patch of land, hashish making had already for some years helped her earn money for food and basic necessities. Thus, despite being 'bitter', hashish money was used in gift exchanges during social celebrations in the community of Kyrgyz hashish producers.

There are many reasons families take part in gift-giving practices. Gift giving at social celebrations allows them to gain status and prestige, and develop a sense of national identity within a rural community. Gift giving usually takes place at rite-of-passage celebrations such as *beshik toi* (celebration of the birth of a baby), *tushoo toi* (a feast celebrating the first steps of an infant), *süröt* (circumcision of boys), wedding ceremonies, sixtieth, seventieth and eightieth anniversaries, funerals, *kuran okutuu* (commemoration feast for the death of a relative), and *ash* (first anniversary of a death of a close relative). These feasts may be celebrated on a small or large scale, but some almost always involve large numbers of people. Wedding celebrations (or related feasts where the dowry of a bride is given or a bride-price is paid), funerals and first-anniversary commemorations are all examples of events where large numbers of guests are invited. Although many families struggle to find the money to participate in feasts, instead of a diminishing role for social celebrations we see that they have become more widespread and lavish since the Soviet period (Werner 1998a). The Kyrgyz government has acknowledged the situation that social celebrations are impoverishing the population of the country (Muraliev 1999). In the southern region of Kyrgyzstan, *aksakals*⁸ and mosques have attempted to reduce funeral expenses to 'prevent poor families incurring huge debts' (Satybaldieva 2010, 110).

Celebrations are also used as major elements in reviving traditional culture in post-Soviet times. In Central Asia many traditions have not been completely erased from the cultural milieu. In Kyrgyzstan, during the Soviet era, it was still possible to hold funerals and first-anniversary commemorations in a lavish way by slaughtering many horses, as they were used as status symbols by the new Soviet Kyrgyz elites (Jacquesson 2008).⁹ Since the Soviet period, the role and symbolism of celebrations have been adapted to a state ideology of preserving tradition – which allied tradition with the new national identity throughout the 1990s in almost all Central Asian countries (Tabyshtalieva 2000).

Another explanation of the importance of lavish social celebrations in the everyday life of Toolu villagers has to do with status and prestige. Gift-exchange practices are used in many societies as a way of obtaining higher status by deliberately giving gifts that cannot be reciprocated by poorer members of a community (Mauss 1970; Scott 1977). With the market economy also encouraging personal consumption, a recent trend is that some richer families have begun slaughtering more livestock during funerals, as well as for third-, seventh- and fortieth-day commemorations. In some funerals the number of large livestock slaughtered reaches three to four horses or cows. Not only the type of meat but also its quality is considered an important marker of status. Other occasions are also used as status-defining activities by many families. In the case of wedding celebrations, the families of the groom and bride exchange gifts (*kiiit*) as an indicator of respect that in-laws display to each other. If a family knows that the in-laws are preparing higher-value gifts, they will try to match them so as not to be perceived as lower in status. Sairakul *eje*, a 56-year-old resident, who was planning on holding a big *toi*, described what she was supposed to prepare for her daughter's in-laws:

We have to buy *kiiit*. We have coats for the groom's parents. We should buy a golden ring for his mother. For their relatives, we should buy suits, plus shawls for women. They could cost minimum 600 som [£10] each. We will also slaughter one sheep for the guests that they can take with them.

Received gifts are also widely publicized among relatives. This helps determine and interpret the status of the giving family among those on the receiving end. Sairakul *eje* explained:

After welcoming my daughter we will also hold a small feast [*keshik*]¹⁰ by giving the meat of the whole sheep that in-laws bring and share all details with our relatives that did not attend the feast. We will invite all the households [*titiin*] of the lineage [*uruu*].

Social networks developed by families through celebrations provide a form of assistance similar to certain Soviet-era practices. Back then, social networking facilitated access to services and goods that were not easily available in a planned economy trapped in a permanent state of shortage (Ledeneva 1998, 2006; Yang 1994). Since the Soviet period, social networks have become transformed by responding to a different set of needs. They provided ‘social security in uncertain times’ (Werner 1998b, 610) and helped secure work outside the country (Reeves 2012; Rubinov 2010).

Two concepts, *katysh* and *yntymak*, derived from traditional Kyrgyz customs, are central to understanding the gift-giving economy of *tois* in Toolu. *Katysh* is expressed in relationships between households in the village. By saying ‘*katyshybyz bar*’, people mean that they *have connections* with others based on exchanges of gifts. *Katysh* can be based on networks of close and immediate relatives, in-laws and their lineage (*uruu*), and close friends and colleagues. *Yntymak* means possessing a strong bond, similar to ‘solidarity’ or ‘unity’. *Yntymak* with other families means that they not only have connections (*katysh*) but also are duty-bound to help each other during life-cycle events.

Close relatives are nearly always involved in all the events described above. For large celebrations they not only provide gifts and money but assist in organizing them. Younger members of an extended family are supposed to provide physical help, while older members are expected to provide financial, organizational and emotional support. Maya *eje*’s network consisted mostly of her neighbours and helped her family with painting the walls and floors of a newly built house. This type of help is known in Kyrgyz culture as *ashar*, communal support in labour-intensive projects, such as renovating old or building new houses. One of my respondents, Aikan, and her family renovated their old house using *ashar*. These cases are illustrative of the support that some of the families with extended social networks can get. Inasmuch as the exchange of gifts operates as a form of credit, physical help provided in *ashar* events is also expected to be reciprocated.

Forms of reciprocity in social networks go beyond their role of safety nets during festivities. They also serve as resources that people can use in many other areas of everyday life. In Toolu being a member of a network means that there are more chances to borrow money without interest. In the survey, 72% of respondents (106 out of 147) reported that they borrowed money without interest from their networks. Among these, 34% could borrow money from their own relatives, 21% from their spouse’s relatives, approximately 20% from neighbours, 14% from shops, and 11% from friends. This kind of social reciprocity and solidarity among members is thought to create a moral economy among many communities (Scott 1977; Thompson 1991a). Solidarity through gift-giving and networking especially provided protective functions for the community members. However, market forces brought changes and weakened the social cohesion in such communities (Scott 1977).

In Toolu, although the support provided by *uruu* (lineage) had not been completely lost, as everyone traced their *uruu*, it had become weaker with marketization of economy. This happened not because some members of *uruu* got excluded but because their contributions were too small. For instance, I was always reminded that there were five different *uruu* making up one clan in the village. Members of an *uruu* were invited for festivities, funerals and commemorations. One person in each *uruu* was responsible for gathering contributions for such occasions from each household. However, the amount gathered from an *uruu* as contribution was generally very small. One of my respondents, Maksat, shared his views on this matter, explaining how difficult it is to gather enough money from an *uruu* to cover all expenses:

We help each other in the lineage. For funerals and commemorations we give 100 som [£1.40] from each household, for good occasions among close relatives we give 2000 som [£28]. For other families in the lineage it is only 100 som. In our *uruu* we have 30 households.

This shows that assistance received from within the *uruu* is not sufficient to cover the expenses of a feast (whether joyful or commemorative). Traditional *katysh* relationships based on lineage do not cover the expenses of social celebrations; costs outweigh these contributions. In cases where *katysh* contributions were increased from 100 to 1000 som (£1.40 to £14), for instance, there was increased pressure on the families that comprised the *uruu*. People could not contribute such large amounts of money to the whole lineage. They had to differentiate between their *katysh* and *yntymak* relationships. Therefore, Cholpon and Meerim's families, who had few connections and did not develop a network of friends and relatives, apart from their parents and siblings, may have received modest support from their lineage in cases of large celebrations or funerals. This support covers minor expenses such as the cost of one sheep, while higher expenses would be on the shoulders of the family holding the gathering. As a result, without a wider, more close-knit social support network, it is a challenge for those less well-off to organize community events.

Monetization of social networks

As we have seen, the mutual assistance provided by networks of friends and relatives did not erode through the proliferation of market forces. Instead, a more intricate transformation of social networks than that proposed by a classical approach to the moral economy has been occurring in Toolu. As more recent approaches to moral and market economies show, both reciprocal and market economies can intermingle and sometimes reinforce one another instead of being incompatible. On the one hand, the community support did not erode and became more pronounced among some members. On the other hand, protection provided by the community was not extended to all members of community, depending upon their participation in gift-giving practices.

For instance, *yntymak*, introduced above, was described by respondents as a pre-agreed type of contribution that families make towards each other's feasts. As Sairakul *eje*'s case suggests, her family can rely on *yntymak* for monetary contributions from her siblings, as they have agreed on a certain sum beforehand. She can expect that some parts of the family expenses will be covered by those contributions. Although it is based on the notion of gift giving, there are a few differences between pre-agreed contribution and traditional gifts.

The notion of a gift is that it is not negotiated or pre-agreed (Mauss 1990). The receiver of a gift is typically expected to reciprocate in the future. Reciprocated gifts, although generally of a similar value, can be of a different form. In the case of pre-agreed *yntymak* contributions, where gifts are monetized, it becomes difficult for receivers to improvise when reciprocating. Monetary gifts reinforce the expectation that the returned gift is of the same value, transforming the way the gift-giving economy operates.

Yang (1994) also observed how money entered the traditional gift-exchange networks during the period of market reforms in the 1970 and 1980s in China. Monetary exchanges followed the logic of commodity-based exchange (market transactions) rather than reciprocal exchange of gifts. Still, the monetization of gifts did not erase the gift-exchange relationships that helped build different support networks. Social networks, according to Yang, were maintained as a tactic for succeeding in a rapidly developing market economy. Similarly, in Toolu, the monetization of gifts, although involving some rational calculation, was not a product of a purely instrumental approach to social networks. By giving money, people did not mean to stop their reciprocal relationships as in the Chinese communities (Yang 1994). In contrast, money was

given when families wanted to maintain and extend their social networks. People gave money to show support, or to commemorate or celebrate important life-cycle events.

However, this does not mean that there were no instrumental elements introduced into the gift-giving practice. For instance, although ‘traditional’ types of gifts such as food, clothes and live-stock were still in use, cash had turned into an expected and highly valued type of gift. I observed some families’ tactics to receive cash as a contribution rather than ‘traditional’ gifts from their *katysh* relationships. Cash is more practical, after all, and could be used to cover the expenses of the gathering. Money as a form of gift became a norm when hosts invited their guests to restaurants rather than to their house. According to Aikan, holding a *toi* in a restaurant was a new tendency in the village but one that was considered prestigious and, in addition, would yield more monetary contributions than one organized at home. She believed that the expenses of a *toi* organized in a cafe/restaurant or at home were comparable. However, more people tended to bring money to a gathering organized at a cafe, and consequently the organizing family could cover more of their expenses. Just a few months after this conversation, I heard that Aikan’s family had prepared a big *toi* in one of the restaurants of Kara-Kol city. The calculation of the incurred costs and ‘earnings’ from money gathered at the *toi*, therefore, introduces an instrumental element into this moral process of gift giving.

Though some close family members still provided help to each other without expectation of return (as also suggested by the study by Sanghera, Ablezova, and Botoeva 2011), many families were finding themselves in a different situation in a wider network of support. Although monetized gift giving still retained some of the functions of protection and support for active members, it exerted pressures on families and in turn excluded some from mutual-support networks. The following case is illustrative of such a process. I was told by a number of my interviewees that in 2009, graduates of the local school organized a lavish celebration for their twentieth graduation anniversary. A group of classmates, who were mostly well-to-do, suggested that the contribution from each male classmate should be 5000 som (£71). Their idea was to invite all the former teachers and female classmates for this occasion. This anniversary celebration turned into a three-day event in a forest reserve outside the village. Some classmates, however, were unable to take such a large sum out of their family budgets. The event was organized in springtime, and some families were struggling to finance the cultivation of their land. As a result, seven classmates decided to organize a separate celebration with a contribution of 1000 som (£14) each. They slaughtered one sheep and celebrated at the home of one of the classmates. The two separate groups did not attend each other’s celebrations. Later that summer, members of the latter group shared the view that they had felt left out. Not only were they unable to attend the bigger celebration, most importantly their nonattendance had impacted their ability to maintain their relationships with other classmates. For instance, during the big celebration, the group of classmates also agreed to begin *sherine* gatherings with their families. The second group only heard about this second-hand and were not invited.

Among those who participated in the large celebration, there were those who did it at the expense of having less money for their more immediate needs. Tolubai, for instance, who participated in the bigger celebration, took out a loan at 29% interest from a bank, which was later paid off with hashish money. People of ‘average’ income rely on micro-credit organizations for making contributions and for organizing various events.

Sonun, a thirty-six year-old woman with four children, revealed how hard it is to take part in social celebrations while making ends meet.¹¹

If some relatives are inviting in-laws, or there is a wedding celebration, we have our *yntymak* and we have agreed to have 1000 som [£14] as a contribution to each other’s feasts. In most of the cases we can’t go. If you don’t find 1000 som how will you go? You will be ashamed of going and as result stay at home. If you don’t contribute any money you will be left out in the future. No one will invite you. People start forgetting about you. Even close relatives would say ‘Oh, they will not come, they don’t

have money.' Then you will be forgotten. If you have money you are a relative, if you don't have money you lose *katysh*. We barely have flour and just stay at home. If we get invited in spring we just can't go. We attend celebrations in autumn. When you don't have money you just pray to God that there will be no *toi*, that no one invites you to a feast. It is better not to have an invitation rather than refusing to go.

Sonun's family struggled between the social pressures of participating in *tois* and the everyday necessities of survival. In order not to be excluded from those networks of relatives and some friends, they sometimes missed an event and made their contribution later, when they could find the money. Their main source of cash in summertime was making hashish. Sonun, her husband and their two daughters regularly made hashish until 2010. In the summer of 2010, Sonun and two of her daughters were invited by some relatives to work outside the region. This case also shows how important money was in maintaining *katysh* networks, even with close relatives.

Participation in *tois* affected not only how families viewed their relationships but also how much money was given as contributions. This was explained to me in one of the interviews, where Kanysh *eje* admitted that her family differentiated not only between *yntymak* and *katysh* but also according to how much was paid as *yntymak* between them and their friends and relatives. According to her, more money used as *yntymak*, or just given as *katysh*, signalled close relationships, a form of respect that in turn leads to an intense and very supportive network. A small amount of money signals willingness to participate in the life of other families, but does not lead to the development of close-knit relationships. It is mostly considered a symbolic type of contribution.

This explanation then helps to understand the survey findings shown in Table 1. According to the survey, all families tried to participate in *yntymak* relationships with other families. Although this clearly shows the different patterns of *yntymak* contributions according to the perceived

Table 1. *Yntymak* (contribution money) with close relatives, by socio-economic condition.

Perceived socio-economic condition of the family ^a	<i>Yntymak</i> contribution of 50–200 som	<i>Yntymak</i> contribution of 300–500 som	<i>Yntymak</i> contribution of 1000–2000 som	<i>Yntymak</i> contribution of 3000–5000 som
Don't have enough money for food (Group 1)	14.3%	71.4%	14.3%	0
Have enough money for food but not for clothes (Group 2)	41.7%	8.3%	50.0%	0
Have enough money for food and clothes but not for durable goods (Group 3)	7.8%	25.5%	60.8%	5.9%
Have enough money for durable goods but not for very expensive things such as cars (Group 4)	5.7%	14.3%	54.3%	25.7%
Have money for everything, we don't limit ourselves (Group 5)	0	0	33.3%	66.7%

^aThese five groups refer to different categories of families according to their perceived well-being. Source: survey of 147 households in Tolu.

Table 2. Could you borrow money without interest? – by socio-economic condition.

Respondents' self-reported status	Yes (%)	No (%)
Don't have enough money for food (Group 1)	25.0	75.0
Have enough money for food but not for clothes (Group 2)	52.6	47.4
Have enough money for food and clothes but not for durable goods (Group 3)	75.0	25.0
Have enough money for durable goods but not for very expensive things such as cars (Group 4)	85.7	14.3
Have money for everything, we don't limit ourselves (Group 5)	75.0	25.0

Source: survey of 147 households in Toolu.

well-being of families, it is noticeable that even the families that did not have enough money for their own food tried to give at least 300–500 som (£4–7). In general, poor and average families would give more than they could afford. They would try to find ways to take part in big *tois* and small gatherings, either by borrowing money, or earning it through making hashish. In other regions of Kyrgyzstan, it was more common to subsidize social celebrations through remittances from close relatives who had migrated abroad (Aitieva 2015; Kapalova 2015; Satybaldieva 2015).

The perception of social networks given by Kanysh *eje* explains why monetization of gift giving leads to difficulties that some families face in getting support. For instance, although the majority of families said that they could borrow money without interest, when differentiated according to the perception of their families' well-being, I could see that not all families enjoyed financial help from their relatives and friends. This finding was supported in in-depth interviews with some of the poor families. In most cases they were told by their relatives that no one had money during such times of hardship.

As Table 2 presents, the higher their self-reported status, the better the chances they reported having in borrowing interest-free money. When families need a large sum of money, they obtain it by selling their harvest, such as potatoes and wheat (48%). Around 20% can still rely on their close relatives, and 16.6% can obtain it through micro-credit organizations. Due to the difficulties encountered in borrowing even a small amount of cash, 31.6% of households said that they sold their harvest. The results of the survey show that although a smaller proportion of families can receive support in borrowing money, a larger number of families rely on their own resources.

The monetization of gifts was therefore a complex process that was able to combine aspects of both market and moral economies. Although still rooted in the moralities of reciprocity, this emerging and constantly transforming system incorporated some instrumental elements more associated with social differentiation of the market economy.

Conclusion

In this paper I demonstrated how the production of hashish is interlinked with the changing dynamics of social relationships and how hashish money entered the complex system of gift-giving practices in Toolu.

The moral economy of social celebrations retains an important role in rural Kyrgyz society. However, the transition from a highly subsidized socialist agricultural economy towards a semi-subsistence-oriented one under new capitalist market conditions created increased pressures on farmers for cash spending and increased consumption. Due to the growing importance of social celebrations to develop social status, gain prestige and maintain traditions, families sought cash to sustain such cultural practices. Thus, as I have presented here, the illegal hashish economy not only supports the agricultural economy but also sustains social relationships

between families. Additionally, in the case of Kyrgyz communities in Toolu, as throughout the country, the ‘traditional’ *tois* organized as rites of passage were used as building blocks for developing a sense of national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The *tois* allowed the local people to combine ‘traditional’ customs with the ‘modern’ demands of market economies.

The problem that many families in Toolu faced was finding the resources to fund such out-of-budget celebrations. This was not only a dilemma faced by people in Toolu; many regions used different strategies to be able to hold such celebrations. Hashish production helped families sustain themselves and support the local customs without resorting to mass migration, as had happened in other regions. For instance, families from southern regions used external migration as their way of subsidizing lavish celebrations (Reeves 2012; Rubinov 2012).

The use of hashish money is associated not only with the lavishness of *tois* but also with the monetization of gift-giving practices and the transformation of social-support networks as a result. The use of money as a gift puts a lot of pressure on families holding big *tois*, as well as on those that take part in them. The fear of weakening social security networks, and in turn losing status and prestige, left people scrambling for cash. Hashish money, in such a context, becomes important not only for poor families with no security networks but also for average-income families that need continued contributions to secure their membership in reciprocal social relations. Hashish production, therefore, helps maintain this system of social relations and keeps the families within the network of relatives and friends, which provides not only status and prestige but also crucial support in times of need. For poor families, who cannot maintain social networks, hashish production helps provide money for basic needs.

However, instead of arguing that market forces were able to destroy the protective functions of society that were proposed by classical theories of moral economy, I want to offer a more complex conclusion. In line with the more recent studies on moral and market economies that view all markets as moral economies but based on different moral grounds from one other (Browne and Milgram 2008; Zelizer 1997), I argue that monetization of gift giving transforms social networks into more layered and stratified dependencies. With cash as a gift becoming a norm, social networks are shrinking and becoming limited to immediate relatives, close friends and tribe members for the less well-off families that are unable to participate in feasts and reciprocate the same amount of contribution that average and well-off families can afford. Hence, monetization of gift giving is transforming the way reciprocal networks used to work.

However, monetization of gift giving does not automatically annihilate the emotional and supportive roles of social networks. These networks still perform their roles of social rituals and security nets. But in most of the cases, only those who are able to maintain the intense forms of communication and contributions are able to reap the benefits. For others, unable to contribute at various events, their networks turn into more symbolic affiliations, with no real obligations or reciprocity of support attached to them. This analysis of the process of transformation of social relationships in Toolu reveals how the moralities of gift giving intermingle with the spread of self-interested market economy exchanges among households.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. The real name of the village is not used for ethical considerations.
2. I use pseudonyms throughout the article.
3. Hashish is a cannabis resin. Marijuana is dried cannabis leaves. Hashish has much higher potency than marijuana.

4. *Sherine* are usually small gatherings held once a month on a rotation basis, with some contribution money given to the host of the dinner each time.
5. Hashish bought from Toolu villagers was usually transported to other regions of Kyrgyzstan and to Russia.
6. As she had 10 children, her family owned eight hectares of land – three hectares were irrigated, and five non-irrigated. They had cultivated all their land the previous year and lost all the harvest. That year they had to buy seeds and were only able to cultivate three hectares. The whole year they had to buy flour and all their food from the market.
7. *Eje* is a term for addressing an older woman. Although Meerim *eje* owned two and half hectares of land, she preferred to rent it out for 1680 som (£24) per year as it was too expensive to cultivate. She cultivated her small plot, near the house, with potatoes, which they used for their own consumption and to sell. Her four children received social benefits of 1200 som (£17) per month. They did not have any livestock. In winter she used to go Kara-Kol city for a few weeks and find some manual work.
8. Elderly men who are respected in their communities.
9. At the same time, even though Central Asian countries were able to retain some of their traditions, the state actually had some control over celebrations, making sure that the *nomenklatura* (political elite) did not abuse their power and financial situation openly. For instance, *nomenklatura* in Kazakhstan were not allowed to hold big celebrations which would stand out from the celebrations held by average citizens (Werner 1998a).
10. This includes sharing food left or brought from a big celebration with people who cannot participate in it.
11. Her family cultivated only their small plot (0.1 ha) near their house with potatoes. According to her account, their previous harvest was only 2500 som (£35). The bigger land that they own they cultivated only in the first years after privatization; as they could not sustain it, they rented it out to other families for 1000 som (£14) per year. Her husband worked as a builder when there was any job available in the village or nearby villages. She usually sewed *tōshök*.

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