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By Coin or By Kine? Barter and Pastoral Production in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT *This article argues against scholarship that views barter and monetized transactions as fundamentally similar practices of exchange. Drawing on an ethnography of small-holder mobile pastoralism in south Kazakhstan, I compare instances in which flock owners chose to sell sheep with examples of barter and explain the calculations behind each choice. In barter exchange, sheep replaced money as both medium of exchange and store of value and the material qualities of sheep meant this shift had profound consequences for the kinds of social relations associated with the transaction. In a context of chronic money shortages, barter of sheep freed participants from future obligations, while monetized exchange locked them into the most prolonged and risky of relations.*

KEYWORDS *Mobile pastoralism, exchange, barter, money, Kazakhstan*

mal qylymnan, aqsha tıymnan ösedi

(a herd grows from a foal, money from a coin)

–Kazakh Proverb

It is late evening in late July, the sun has set, and we have gone to bed, sleeping in the cool night air on bedding unrolled on the porch of the home. In the distance, a vehicle can be heard lumbering in low gear along the road, its lights glowing faintly from behind hills, and then flashing as it rounds the bend. When it comes to the sheep station, it does not continue down the track but turns and comes slowly towards the house, halting just below the cooking shed. We can see it is an old Soviet-era farm truck, but the people inside wait patiently as the dogs circle, barking frantically, and sliding in and out of the pool of light cast by the truck's headlights. We wait as Aizhan

goes out to greet the driver, who, after a brief conversation, turns the truck and continues on down the track. Returning, she tells us that it was loaded with watermelon the men had hoped to barter. Unable to find a cash market for their crop and unwilling to let it rot in the field, the men had filled a truck and driven out into the desert, offering to each sheep station in turn a trade of 30 watermelon for one *laq* (kid goat).¹

The encounter with the men in the truck had lasted only a minute, yet it encapsulated a series of issues, from the practice of agriculture in post-Soviet Central Asia and on to ever more abstract questions of barter vs. commodity exchange. The attempt to trade a goat for melons parallels descriptions of barter from across the former Soviet Union. In the turmoil of the post-Soviet reorganization and especially during the currency collapse of 1998, both businesses and individual households had turned away from cash exchange and towards barter (Anderson 2000; Cellarius 2000; Rogers 2005). Humphrey (2000a; 2000b; 2002), in a series of scholarly articles on exchange in post-Soviet Russia, describes elaborate chains of exchange, in which kolkhozes traded meat and wool for lumber and factories and mines haggled with government ministries. In Kazakhstan, the vast flocks of the Soviet era had rapidly melted away as state and collective farms turned to one of their few remaining assets, sheep, to settle debts and pay workers (Jungbluth & Van Veen 2004; Robinson & Milner-Gulland 2003).

In 2008, much of this turmoil could seem safely in the past: the tenge, Kazakhstan's currency, had been stable against international currencies for many years, while for those who still feared currency collapse, dollars and euros were readily available. Villagers participated in multiple arenas where monetization was the norm: weddings gifts took the form of envelopes filled with tenge or dollars; the huge central bazaars of Almaty and Taraz were places of cash exchange; and if a family had children studying in the city, tuition and apartment rental would require money. The difficulty for everyone, however, was that low wages and high unemployment meant money itself was in short supply.

In Taraz, when the collective and state farms that had organized pastoral production in the Soviet era were broken up many village households had successfully turned to revived practices of mobile pastoralism – focused on the indigenous fat-tailed sheep rather than imported breeds – as a survival strategy. In 2008, I spent a year living in a village near Taraz and have made follow-up visits each year since this stay, and my interviews with and observations of the daily life of small-holder sheep farmers form the basis of this article. A

primary difficulty for the flock owners with whom I stayed was that the general absence of money in the village means that buyers for their sheep were both difficult to find and, once found, slow to pay. In consequence, flock owners sought out situations in which sheep might be translated into some good other than money: labour, watermelon, or the prestige associated with a meat-rich diet. In 2008, however, these dynamics were further complicated by a local drought and by the worldwide spike in food commodity prices, which together threw household budgets into even greater disarray and combined to drive the price of sheep to unpredictable lows. In this context, sheep continued to function as tokens of value in barter exchange and as repositories and generators of wealth, yet the manner in which they did so was profoundly shaped by the material nature of the sheep themselves. What sheep produce – wool, meat, and *tezek* (dried dung) – and what they require to reproduce – hay and husbandry – combined to free flock holders from participation in certain cash-denominated flows of material goods and to require their participation in others.²

Gifts, Commodities, and Barter

Descriptions of post-Soviet exchange practices often resemble the primordial chaos of barter from which, according to theorists from Adam Smith to Karl Marx, money itself first sprang. In *Capital*, Marx provided a detailed chronology of the various forms exchange had taken: the first stage was one of barter, as objects were traded through individual, ad hoc, negotiations of equivalence; later, certain objects were habitually exchanged for others and their equivalence acquires the quality of the taken for granted; and eventually, one commodity was singled out and generally agreed on as the universal equivalent for all other commodities, which then have their relative value grounded by reference to an equivalent quantity of this new ‘money commodity’ (Marx & Engels 2007). Smith likewise thought that money existed as a solution to the contradictions and inefficiencies implicit in barter: to engage in barter, one needed a ‘double coincidence of wants’, someone who had shoes and wanted turnips at the exact moment someone else had turnips and wanted shoes, but in monetized exchange, one need only find someone who wanted turnips or shoes and had money. Coin, so the story went, was born from the frustrations of unconsummated consumption.

In Marx’s account, money has a peculiarly uncanny quality: gold and silver, sign vehicles for human calculations of value, are ‘natural objects with strange social qualities’. Later analyses have clarified the functions it performs – a store of value, the unit by which value is counted, and the medium by which

value is transferred – and have stressed that for money to perform these functions, it is best made from something portable, imperishable, and, ideally, easily divisible (Dutta 2000; Graeber 2011). The relationship between money as physical object and its ‘strange social qualities’ continues to provoke unease. As Bill Maurer wrote in a review of the anthropology of money, currency’s history contains repeated ‘moments when the link between the representation and reality of money and finance break down, denaturalizing the taken for granted monetary order, and place value in question’ (2006:28). Maurer’s reference point was nineteenth and twentieth-centuries debates over the gold standard in the USA; he could as easily have spoken of the countries of the former Soviet Union, where currency collapse was always a possibility and where in rural areas vodka and sheep competed with paper money as medium of exchange and store of value.

The attraction of barter would seem to be that it eludes the anxieties provoked by money’s uncanny qualities: barter is an atomized transaction, agreed to out of individual considerations of desire and utility, and the values there calculated need neither endure nor govern subsequent exchange. Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, in an essay explicitly devoted to defining barter, begin with this point: in barter, exchange is driven by each side’s interest in the other’s possessions and the goods are measured not by external considerations of worth, but by an ‘internal balance’ (1992:7). A farmer in highland Bulgaria might, for example, trade potatoes for the fruits and vegetables better grown at lower elevations; in this exchange, both sides sacrifice to acquire something they intend to eat (Cellarius 2000: 79). In short, barter is driven by a ‘double coincidence of wants’ and the challenge any participant in barter faces is encountering that coincidence. This challenge could be solved through one party agreeing to wait for repayment but such ‘delayed reciprocity’ would raise the risk that the debt would never be paid off. Because of this, Humphrey (1992), in an ethnography of barter practices in north-east Nepal, found that exchange tended to occur between previously known and trusted partners.

In these accounts, if barter is dissimilar from commodity exchange in the absence of an agreed-upon medium of exchange, it is still similar in that it springs from the pursuit of individual self-interest. Arjun Appadurai thus concludes that Marx was correct in detecting a ‘commonality of spirit’ between barter and commodity exchanges, for both possess an ‘object-centered, relatively impersonal, asocial nature’ (1988:10). The ephemeral nature of barter transactions further makes them profoundly different from the kinds of long-

term transactions that bind together social and cosmic orders (Bloch & Parry 1989).

This ‘commonality of spirit’ leads David Graeber, in his *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), to offer a sharp critique of the conclusion that barter is qualitatively different from monetized exchange. Graeber’s critique emerges from his larger argument that the history of money is really the history of debt, for his focus on debt necessarily implies that money’s key function is not to mediate exchange but to count what is owed. Graeber argues that a true barter economy is unlikely to have ever existed, as the aggression implicit in participants’ pursuit of individual self-interest meant that a society in which it was the standard form of exchange would be ‘one in which everybody was an inch away from everybody else’s throat’ (2011:33). Smith and the generations of economists who argued that money emerged from barter relied on a false history of exchange: the barter economies they described would indeed have been inefficient, yet no anthropologist has ever described a society in which exchange habitually took the form of barter. Both the examples of barter from post-Soviet societies and Smith’s own examples of dried cod in Newfoundland are not examples of a true barter economy, Graeber concludes, for both took place in the shadow of monetized exchange: dried cod or vodka may have been the medium of exchange, but money was the unit of account.

A close examination of barter practices as they occur in rural south Kazakhstan demonstrates that barter was neither a precursor nor simply an extension of monetized exchange. Barter exchange and monetized exchange enact radically different forms of social relations precisely because sheep as a token of value serve to ameliorate the worries, delays, and conflicts that dog monetized exchange. These benefits emerge expressly from the manner in which the material qualities of that token’s sign vehicle – the eating, bleating, bleeding, breeding, and shitting fat-tailed sheep – allow it to slide between distinct ‘regimes of value’ (Appadurai 1988). Why this was so is shaped by both the usufructs and the requirements of sheep flocks, which together meant that while barter in sheep may exist in the shadow of money, the use of sheep as the medium of exchange ensures that the problems of trust, coincidence of wants, and debt are resolved in a manner distinct from that of monetary transactions.

Tezek, Wool, and Hides

Tezek in Kazakh means dried dung burned as fuel. Farther south, this was often cow dung that had been mixed with straw, formed into bricks, and

then dried in the sun, but in Taraz, it most commonly meant lumps of dried manure pitchforked from the sheep paddock.³ Stores of *tezek* could be found at most of the village households, piled in an outbuilding or stacked in the yard and roughly roofed over with scraps of old sheet metal or torn carpet. It was one of a variety of energy sources utilized for cooking and heating in the village. In summer, most people relied on gas cook rings hitched to small tanks and in winter, some homes were heated with *tezek*, while other households preferred coal as it made for a warmer and less smoky house.⁴ Even those households that relied on gas and coal, however, would keep a stash of *tezek* and firewood on hand to fire the large, outdoor *pesh* (brick cooking range) used when large numbers of guests came. The significance of *tezek* for small-holder pastoralists was not so much that its sale provides a significant income stream, but rather that its presence allows flock owners to avoid one of the greatest drains on the budgets of rural households: coal.⁵

One of the ironies of pastoral production in contemporary Kazakhstan is that while sheep dung is a source of profit and a guard against unnecessary expenditures, sheep wool is a costly nuisance. Shearing in spring is a necessity, but it is also labour-intensive and the labour it requires takes considerable skill, the more so as most smallholders do not have electric clippers and therefore must find workers capable of working with manual shears. In Taraz, the people who possessed this skill were often 'Oralman' or Kazakhs who had moved to Kazakhstan from neighbouring countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Those who came from Mongolia or Xinjiang were highly regarded for their knowledge of sheep husbandry and formed the core of most shearing crews. With each man capable of shearing between 30 and 40 sheep, a crew of 10–15 workers could usually process an entire flock in a single day. For this work, the group would be paid 50,000KZT (slightly more than 400USD) or, if denominated in the currency typically used to settle the debt, five not especially fat sheep.

The difficulty for the sheep owner was that this labour cost far exceeded the value of the wool acquired. In the Soviet era, when the *kolkhoz's* flock had consisted almost entirely of *merinos* sheep, meat and wool had both been outputs of significant value, but the switch to *Kazakh qoy* (fat-tailed sheep) raised for local consumption had meant the abandonment of wool as a source of revenue.⁶ The fleece of a fat-tailed sheep is usually a patchwork of white, brown, and black, with coarse fibres that, if woven or knitted, result in stiff and scratchy textiles. As one shepherd explained to me, the wool can be used to make socks, *valenki* (felted boots), but little else. As a result, the fleece is worth only

around 5KZT per kilo. With each sheep fleece weighing from two to three kilos, the wool from an entire flock will typically amount to no more than 3000–5000KZT (25–40USD). *Merinos* sheep wool is of course worth far more – around 150KZT per kilo – but *merinos* sheep require more stored fodder for winter and more shepherds to watch them when in the field, yet command far lower prices when sold for meat.

Unlike *tezek*, sheep wool also offered no use value desired as a shield against external expenses. In earlier times, sheep wool held great significance in the material culture associated with mobile pastoralism: it was the source for the felt that covered yurts and the carpets that covered the yurt's floor, but both of these craft traditions had faded from daily life in the village I lived in. Although many people still chose to live in yurts when they took their flocks to the mountain pastures in summer, other herders preferred to live in army surplus canvas tents or, even better, metal *bagons* (trailers). Portisch (2010), in her ethnography of women's textile work among Kazakhs in Mongolia, found a vibrant craft tradition: *syрмаq*, or carpets sown from dyed felts, still lined the insides of homes, formed part of a bride's dowry, and served to vouchsafe the bride's industry and skill. In south Kazakhstan, I met people who did make *tekemet*, a type of carpet in which the pattern is created by layering different colours of wool together before felting begins and such carpets could still be found somewhere in most homes. But they competed with woven carpets made by factories in China or Iran and it was the woven carpets that had the higher status. In the homes I visited, the interior rooms used to entertain guests would have factory carpets on the floor and hanging from the walls and the *tekemet* would be found covering the floor in an outbuilding or on an outdoor porch. In this context, no one eagerly awaited the spring shearing. Shearing might be a necessary part of sheep husbandry, but it was an expense to be endured not a source of value.

If the wool was only a nuisance, the hide from which it sprung still held some value. Most families in the village did not buy meat, but preferred to purchase a sheep, slaughter it, and then salt and dry the meat. During slaughter, the sheep would be carefully skinned, a portion of the sheep's intestine would be placed in the centre of the hide, both would heavily sprinkled with salt to prevent spoilage, and the hide would then be rolled up and set aside for resale. How much the hide was worth depended on the season: in mid-summer, it was almost without value. It might bring as little as 150KZT (about a dollar and a quarter, USD), which was enough to buy some ice-cream for the children but little more. In winter, however, when the wool was thickest and softest, it

would be worth far more, while in spring, immediately after shearing, the hide would reach its highest value and bring as much as 1000KZT (8.00USD). The intestines – destined for use as casings in a sausage factory elsewhere in Kazakhstan – sold for around 250KZT (2.00USD), winter or summer.

It was, however, the fat of the *Kazakh qoy* that above all other products greased the wheels of the post-Soviet pastoral economy.

Meat, Fat, and the Price of Sheep

The *merinos* sheep lacks the fat of the *Kazakh qoy* and this makes it both less thrifty in a hard winter and less valuable in sale. Just as the lean *merinos* sheep must huddle in a barn during winter storms, so will a person fed on its meat be unable to endure the cold of winter. Zanca (2007) has noted how, in Uzbekistan, estimation of food's tastiness and worth revolves around the amount of fat in it and a similar calculus of the succulent occurred in the village in which I lived: the best skewer of *shashlik* (grilled meat) was the one with the most chunks of fat; the cuts of meat heaped on a guest's portion ought include fat; while such simple, daily dishes as noodles or meat and potatoes were ideally cooked in a base of rendered sheep fat.⁷ The high value placed on fat was matched by the low value put on the lean: an adult *merino* might be worth at best 12,000KZT (96USD), but would often bring only 6000–8000KZT (48–64USD), where an adult fat-tailed sheep could bring as much as 23,000KZT (184USD).

This simple cut between the value of the *Kazakh qoy* and the *merinos* is, however, only the first factor among many: the price of a sheep is shaped by everything from the age of the sheep to the size of its tail, the pastures on which it grazed, the market in which it was sold, the time of the year, and the year itself. The conversion of the sheep into money is further complicated by the marked absence of cash money within the village: even once a buyer has been found and a price agreed upon and the seller must sometimes wait months before the debt is paid. In this context, flock owners often revert to alternate techniques for extracting value from flock: sheep are bartered for goods and services and sheep are eaten by the flock holder's family in a display of consumption that extracts not only nutritional value, but also social standing from the flock.

The most important variable in the price of a sheep was age and gender. The highest prices were paid for rams bought for breeding and shepherds were quick to point to valuable rams and say what price had been paid for them. The ram on a neighbouring ranch had cost fully 70,000KZT (560USD), while the rams



Figure 1. Slaughtered gozy. This lamb has already developed a fat tail worthy of comment. Photo by author.

on the ranch I stayed on – younger and without the enormous, watermelon-like double tail of a full-grown *Kazakh qoy* – had been bought at the only slightly less stratospheric price of 40,000KZT (320USD). A *gozy* (lamb) stood at the other extreme of value: one might be purchased for as little as 6000KZT (48USD). It should be noted, however, that dollar for pound, this is a higher price than the one paid for an adult sheep and as such was just as much a reflection of exceptional qualities as the more obviously high price paid for a ram (Figure 1). Lambs may have little meat, but what they do have is astonishingly tender and succulent. That might matter little when making *kespe közhe* (meat stew), but a dish like *syrbaz* required lamb. To make *syrbaz*, one first butchers a young lamb, then places chunks of fat cut from its tail in the bottom of a *qazan* (cauldron), and then layers of fat, meat, tripe, and organs. Finally, the dish is covered with a layer of *ayran* (soured milk), onions, and spices and slow-cooked for hours. In the end, the meat is almost pudding-like in its softness (Figure 2). The large amount of resources invested in *syrbaz* – a whole lamb that, had it been left to graze, would soon have offered both more meat and a higher market price – meant it was a dish eaten only on special occasions: birthdays or the arrival of a particularly honoured guest.⁸

Between these two extremes stands the full-grown ewe: on average, such a sheep would be worth 10,000–12,000KZT (80–100USD). This price could easily go higher, however, depending on the place of purchase, the time of the year, and even the pasture. The price was tied, perhaps first of all, to



Figure 2. Sirbaz. The dish has just been placed on the fire. Photo by author.

where the sheep was bought: if a villager took the trouble to drive out into the steppe and fetch the sheep, it might be had for 10,000KZT; bought in the village *mal bazaar*, the same sheep might bring 12,000KZT; and still farther away in the regional centres of Lygovoï or Merke, the price might rise as high as 14,000KZT. A sheep pastured in the desert might also bring a higher price than one from the mountains. In summer, most families drove their flocks to the high mountain pastures to take advantage of the cooler air and richer grass. Oddly, however, this could drive the worth of the sheep down: the shorter, tougher grass of the desert had, I was told, more *quat* (strength) and the meat of sheep from the desert was in turn heartier.

Increasing the worth of a sheep could be as simple as increasing its weight and then timing the sale for the New Year. Towards the New Year, villagers would select a particularly fat sheep to slaughter and then invite relatives and friends as guests. Sometimes, a household would have a sheep of its own set aside for this – the family I lived with in the desert had an enormous, gelded ram they were carefully fattening – but most would have to turn to the *mal bazaar*. The bazaar prices were thus highest near the New Year and the fattening of sheep carefully timed for this. In the fall, sheep were often sent to the village and stall fed until they grew fat enough to fetch a premium price. Sometimes a villager would simply purchase a few skinny sheep, fatten them, and then resell them at a profit. In other cases, a flock owner might strike a bargain with a relative or friend in the village: one would provide sheep, the latter labour and grain, and the profits then split. In one case I knew of, a villager

called a relative with a flock and asked him to select 11 lean sheep. The flock owner then carefully selected particularly unthrifty sheep, ones which might have a hard time surviving the winter but would bring little money if sold immediately (and would indeed be hard to sell), and carried them to the village. In December, the flock owner would sell seven sheep and the villager four.

The compromises and the effort involved in such transactions were illustrated for me when Aisultan, a teenage boy who lived near me in the village, set out to fatten a sheep for sale. Aisultan had spent the summer helping his family herd sheep in the desert, but had returned to the village when the school year began. Once in school, he was taken by the desire to own a cell phone, one that had a camera and could play music. Rather than begging his parents, he asked them to give him an unthrifty sheep to fatten. His mother was delighted – ‘*mü köp, basyngda*’ (he’s got lots of brains in his head) – and sent a sheep back to the village, where Aisultan made a makeshift stall for it in the bed of an unused farm truck. When I visited him again a month later, he happily told me to come and see his sheep and gathered up a handful of hay and a scoop of grain. We clambered up on the back of the truck and Aisultan quickly cleared the dried stalks of *zhantaq* (camel thorn) remaining from the previous feeding out of the trough. When I remarked on how little food he was giving the sheep, Aisultan laughed and explained that he would be back in an hour with more food – feeding the sheep a little at a time in one-hour intervals was the quickest way to fatten it. The dried *zhantaq* stalks he set aside now, but he would refill the trough with them last thing at night.

Aisultan’s eventual sale of his sheep illustrated another aspect of village exchange: in a situation of constantly fluctuating value, considerable effort was invested in acquiring knowledge about the price of sheep. When I spoke with Aisultan in the fall, he told me quite confidently that he would sell his sheep in the village *mal bazaar* and would get 13,000–14,000KZT (104–112USD) for it. If he waited until December, however, he could confidently expect to get 20,000–25,000KZT (160–200USD). That would mean, of course, delaying the purchase of his cell phone for another two months and so in mid-October he took his sheep to the *mal bazaar*. He spent the morning chatting and fielding offers for his sheep, only to return to his home in the early afternoon with an unsold sheep. In one sense, his trip was a failure and in another sense, a success: on his return, Aisultan promptly sold

his sheep to a neighbour for 14,000KZT. The trip had confirmed what he already suspected: the price his neighbour had offered was a fair one.

This anecdote explains what is a superficially puzzling aspect of the village *mal bazaar*: although most of the flock owners and many of the villagers I knew diligently visited it each weekend, the flock owners did not always come with a sheep to sell, did not seem bothered if they failed to sell the one they had brought, in practice did most of their selling outside the *mal bazaar*, and if asked why they had come might reply '*ünsheyin*' (for no reason), while many of the villagers I knew did not go to the bazaar in the expectation of purchasing a sheep and if they did need a sheep to slaughter, would go directly to a flock owner they knew. Why, then, did so many people visit the *mal bazaar*? One reason was simple curiosity: for a shepherd herding sheep in the desert, the weekly *mal bazaar* was a central social event, a chance to gather with others and trade news and gossip. Another reason, however, was that even if not all sheep were sold, enough changed hands that people could gain an accurate idea of what, exactly, sheep were worth that week. The *mal bazaar* was an informational clearinghouse, a setting for the exchange of knowledge both social and economic.

Unfortunately, while the *mal bazaar* might allow one to know how much a sheep was worth and could assist in finding a taker, they were an imperfect solution to the fundamental question of how sheep could be converted into money. The overall absence of money within the village meant that flows of sheep from shepherd to villager occurred in the context of congested and delayed flows of money between people. In the village in which I lived, there was a constant wash of money between households and individuals in the form of small and large loans of money. These loans facilitated everything from paying the few dollars necessary to take a taxi to the city to pick up a pension payment to gathering the thousands of dollars necessary to pay for a wedding. Some of these loans would be repaid, some were not meant to be, and distinguishing the two was a bewildering process fraught with the possibility of conflict. Since a full-grown sheep is such an expensive item, payment would often be delayed for months. In one case I was familiar with, a young man from the village purchased a sheep for his family from a neighbour's flock, promising payment when he received his wages the next month. Shortly thereafter, he disappeared for a job in the city, and, despite repeated requests for repayment, the debt was only discharged many months later when the young man's older brother, himself visiting from a job in the city, was approached about repayment. In these situations, it is not barter but

money which requires the greatest degree of trust and holds the greatest potential for conflict.

The Fat and the Gleaned? Wheat, Hay, Watermelon, and the Logic of Barter

The difficulty of converting sheep to money and the need to seek out alternatives to monetized transactions was intensified when, in 2008, a mix of factors actual and expected and local and international combined to drive the worth of a sheep to unpredictable lows. A fat, full-grown sheep that might have brought 30,000KZT the year before was suddenly worth only 20,000KZT. The year before, a *‘toq’* (lamb) might have, if fat enough, brought as much as 12,000KZT, while even an average lamb could be reasonably expected to fetch 6000 or 7000KZT. This year, however, a lean *toq* might bring as little as 3500KZT, if a buyer could even be found – I can remember one occasion in which the father in the family I was living with took 10 sheep to market and returned having managed to sell only two of them. The simplest reason for this decline was a cold spring followed by a dry summer. In March, the steppe had turned green, but in April, there had been a killing frost. In early May, I walked through fields in which the plants were barely as high as my feet and in a good year, they should have been knee high. They would grow little more, for the moisture from snowmelt would be swiftly gone from the soil, while no rain would come till late fall. The lack of browse meant that the sheep were lean and drew little interest at market.

This problem was compounded by the widespread expectation that the coming winter would be harsh. A considerable scholarly literature exists on the impact winter weather has on mobile pastoralism. The paramount problem is *jut*, in which rain falls on snow and freezes to form a hard crust that the sheep cannot break through. If the flock owner lacks reserves of hay or grain, the result can be the mass death of the flock from starvation. The fear of the coming winter meant that flock owners all alike sought to acquire large reserves of hay at precisely the moment when the drought had made harvesting hay difficult. Through the summer, the price of hay had risen sharply until it stood at 320KZT (2.50USD) a bale or roughly twice what it had cost the winter before. A flock of 300–400 fat-tailed sheep might, if able to forage in the steppe, need only one or two bales of hay per day. If the winter were mild, lasting only from the end of December to the middle of March and with the sheep able to browse throughout, then the flock might have consumed only 200 bales of hay by the time spring arrived. If, however, the winter were

Figure 3. Winter hay reserves. This stack contains roughly 1200 bales of hay. In the foreground, a large stack of tezek can be seen. Photo by author.



fierce, then the sheep would need 15–20 bales per day and the amount of hay sufficient to survive the winter could jump to unpredictably dire levels. In the case of the sheep station that I lived on, the conclusion was that fully 2400 bales of hay would be stockpiled. If, through misfortune or lack of foresight, this hay were to be bought bale by bale in *Aqyrtöbe*, then the total cost would be approximately three quarters of a million tenge (about 6000USD). In order to raise this money, flock owners were forced to sell off large portions of their flock, meaning that the *mal bazaars* were flooded with sheep at precisely the moment when many households were seeking to economize on their consumption of sheep meat (Figure 3).

Sheep meat's slide from staple to luxury was itself the product of a jump in the price of still another good: wheat for baking bread. The worth of bread was first brought home to me when I went shopping with a family in the southern city of Turkestan. On our return from the *bazaar*, the father asked me to take the bread out of the bags holding the other groceries and carry it in my lap instead – leaving it on the floor of the *Neva* with the carrots and potatoes would have been disrespectful. Similarly, when eating flatbread the bread must always be placed face up on the plate, while stale bread is saved and fed to dogs. Bread is both revered and ubiquitous, consumed with breakfast, lunch, dinner, and with each and every break for tea. A family of three adults and three children might easily eat four–five loaves a day. In this context, any rise in the price of flour or bread has a dangerous ripple effect on the household budget.

When I arrived in the village, one of the first things I heard about was the increase in the price of bread. The year before, a loaf of bread had been only

25KZT, but by mid-summer, it cost 50KZT. In 2006, however, a mixture of different factors – the diversion of grain to biofuel production, climatic disasters around the world, export restrictions by producer countries, and aggressive purchase strategies by consumer countries – had combined to drive prices for staple grains to startling heights. By 2008, prices were as much as 60% higher than they had been two years before (Trostle 2008; Liefert *et al.* 2010). In Kazakhstan, as citizens competed with external markets for the country's wheat harvest, city bakeries experienced shortages of flour even as the country's production of wheat actually rose. In fall 2007, *Turkestan* newspaper reported that, in the course of a single week, the price of bread in Almaty stores had risen from 50KZT per loaf to 65KZT, while in a few places it could even cost 100KZT; the newspaper warned that shortages were such that, 'if you don't manage to buy loaves when they are still hot and fresh from the oven in the morning, you will be left without bread until the next day'.⁹

Of course, most families in the village chose to cook their own bread. The drought in Taraz, however, directly affected even this practice. During de-collectivization, each household in the *kolkhoz* had received 25 hectares of agricultural land on the outskirts of the village. Twenty-five hectares, however, make for a small wheat ranch and in any case most of the villagers lacked the financial and technical resources to cultivate the land themselves. Instead, they often struck agreements in which access to land was traded for a share of the harvest: a third party would cultivate the land, providing the labour, seed, and equipment, and in exchange the field's owner received a share of the harvest. A 25 hectare field might yield as much as 17,000 tons of wheat, of which 2500 would go to the field's owner. Some of this wheat would then be sold in the markets of Taraz or perhaps trucked as far as Chimkent for resale to traders from Uzbekistan and on to Afghanistan, but some would be delivered to the flour mill in Taraz and then kept for the family's own use. The difficulty, however, was that the fields around the village were not irrigated and a good wheat harvest was thus solely dependent on rains that, in 2008, never came.

Unable to rely on grain from their own fields, villagers were forced to purchase flour. However, while a year before a sack of flour had cost only 1100KZT, in 2008 it had increased to over 2000KZT. A single family might use up a full sack of flour in the course of only two weeks. The rise in the price of wheat meant that this family could expect to spend 6000–7500KZT (50–60USD) on bread each month if they purchased it from a store and at least 4000KZT (32USD) if they made the bread themselves. In an environment

where a schoolteacher made 30,000KZT (240USD) a month, a pensioner might receive 10,000KZT (80USD), while many adults were simply unemployed, expenditures on bread meant that many households had to find other items to economize on. Sometimes this meant that they were unable to pay for electricity; often, it meant they purchased a single sheep, typically a full-grown ewe with more if tougher meat, slaughtered it, salted it, dried it in the cool air from the mountains, and tried to make the meat last their family for a month or more. Village households' struggle to obtain bread for their families and thus directly complicated flock owners' struggle to obtain hay for the winter.

Sheep farmers, however, were possessed of two pieces of good fortune: first, watermelon and hay farmers faced a similar lack of customers able to pay in cash and second, however much the price of sheep might fluctuate, their value as meat and breed stock remained relatively constant. In the case of the 2400 bales which the owner of the *rancha* intended to stockpile for the winter, as soon as the first instalment of hay had arrived and been stacked, the back of the truck was reloaded with 20 sheep. Ayan had, with the help of an older brother in another town, found a man who made his living harvesting and selling hay and who was willing to take his payment in live sheep. The price hammered out between the two was that 2400 bales of hay would be given for 40 sheep. This meant that if the standard price of 320KZT per bale was used, then the sheep were being valued at roughly 19,000KZT apiece (150USD) – a spectacularly generous valuation given that sheep bought from the desert were going for as little as 9000, while even a stall-fattened sheep fetched only 14,000KZT in the village. In fact, however, a slightly different calculus applied: since the hay was to be bought in bulk, each bale was counted as worth only 150KZT – the scale of this discount was brought home when, the very next day, two young men drove out to the sheep station: they had heard a rumour in a neighbouring village that Ayan had purchased hay at this price and had immediately sought him out in hopes that they could also purchase at this price.

This strict accounting of the barter, however, obscures much of the logic behind it: a two-year old ewe might, in 2008, be worth only 9000KZT, but the year before they had been worth as much as 20,000KZT. The hay seller had in effect acquired a small flock: if the price recovered and if the sheep lambed in spring, he would not only have received the full price for his hay but also made a spectacular rate of interest on his flock. The hay seller could, of course, have simply agreed to wait for repayment until the following summer and thereby have avoided the expense and effort required for sheep

husbandry. That agreement, however, would have cost him the potential profit provided by the sheep lambing. Beyond this, it would have required extending a relationship of credit to a household from a distant village, with whom he had the most tenuous of connections. The immediate offer of sheep allowed him to store his profit in a form that was capable of providing a kind of interest and that did not require long-term relations of trust.

This peculiar merit of sheep in a time of crisis is further illustrated by a comparison with the fate of a farmer who grew another good for which sheep were bartered: watermelon. The melons in this case were cultivated by a Turkish man who, for the previous 10 years, had grown watermelon while also building up a flock of some 300 sheep. In 2008, he had seeded a field, fertilized it with *tezek*, and carefully watered it through the drought. Unfortunately, although the drought had not prevented him from getting an excellent harvest, the economic turmoil it brought about drove the price of melons down as surely as it had the price of sheep and clients willing to purchase in bulk could not be found. Melons, however, if unsold cannot be safely herded through the winter, nor may they be counted on to lamb in spring, and so he set out to translate his melons, if not into money, at least into herd animals: he called flock owners and villagers he knew and offered his melons in barter. If, for example, a flock owner were willing to gather the melons himself, he could for one *laq* (kid goat) twice load his jeep. This was a starvation price – a kid goat was worth roughly 3000KZT (24USD), while two jeeploads comes to about 300 melons; watermelon prices themselves range from perhaps 300KZT in early spring, but fall to as little as 50–80KZT in late summer – that looked good only in comparison with the reality that the watermelons would otherwise ripen and burst to rot in fields un-gleaned. As one purchaser remarked, a kid goat is more than nothing.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of studies that examine the relation between the form of a sign vehicle – its iteration in media aural, visual, or tactile – and its semiotic capacity.¹⁰ With coin, an entity of varied form and murky meaning, scholars have interrogated the often troubled relationship between the material of its sign vehicle and the meaning(s) it ought to convey (Keane 2001). Studies of barter, in contrast, sometime downplay these questions. Graeber, in his study of debt, examines Smith's examples – of dried cod being used as currency in Newfoundland and of nails traded for beer in Scotland – and writes that 'scholars checked into most of those

examples and discovered that in just about every case, the people involved were quite familiar with the use of money and, in fact, were using money – as a unit of account’ (2011: 37). The implication is that if ‘money’ remained the unit of account, it might not matter much if the medium of exchange happened to be salt cod (or sheep). Barter, it seemed, was an extension of monetized exchanged, something that could be found when money was in short supply, but which always took place in the shadow of monetization.

This study in no way challenges the main part of that conclusion. The examples of sheep barter described here unquestionably took place in the context of money, even if the precise relationship of sheep to money was unclear and frequently shifting. Rather, what it suggests is that the shift from money to barter and from coin to sheep as a medium of exchange and store of value entails a shift in the material form of the sign and that this has profound consequences for the kinds of social relations associated with exchange. Sheep can be used to facilitate barter relations and to discharge monetary debts, but they can also be relied upon to lamb and thereby increase wealth, to produce *tezek* and thus free households from other forms of consumption, and last of all, they can be slaughtered to feed one’s family or show hospitality to a guest. Crucially, sheep preserve these qualities regardless of their exact relationship to money and it is this simultaneous worth within multiple regimes of value that allowed them to serve as tokens in barter exchange even when the market for sheep had collapsed. Money might be a collective fantasy, but sheep could be counted on to remain sheep.

Yet the value of sheep is no more reducible to their material qualities than value is a natural quality of gold. Sheep are central to the history of the steppe and to the foodways of rural Kazakhstan; like potatoes in Ireland and Russia, their presence is intimately wound together with the memory of deprivation – the famine in Ireland and the Second World War in Russia – and the experience of wealth, for it is their taste that offers the reassurance of plenty (Glassie 1995; Ries 2009). Slaughtering a sheep signals hospitality and welcomes the return of kin. Yet the very depth with which sheep are embedded in village life paradoxically ensures that acts of barter with sheep can be isolated from broader questions of trust or doubt. To convert sheep to watermelon or hay requires effort, but the abiding value of sheep ensures that their offer will be sufficient to complete the exchange and to convert sheep to money requires far more effort, the difficulty with which buyers are found is matched by the difficulty of persuading them to pay and it is therefore money as a medium of

exchange that locks people into the most agonized, prolonged, and risky relations of exchange.

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Notes

1. The names of all individuals and villages referred to in this text have been changed. Cities and regional centres are identified by their contemporary names.
2. My examination of mobile pastoral production follows in the footsteps of a wealth of previous studies of pastoral economies. See Khazanov (1994) for a general survey of pastoralism in Central Asia, Shahrani (2002) for an ethnography of mobile pastoralism in Afghanistan, and Humphrey and Sneath (2006) for a study of mobile pastoralism in post-Soviet Mongolia.
3. This is in some ways an oversimplification, as usage varies by district. Most dictionaries list *tezek*, *bog*, and *qi* as synonyms for excrement, with *bog* having a vulgar connotation while *tezek* and *qi* refer to animal dung utilized as fuel. In Taraz, I only ever heard the word *tezek* employed and in other regions, *tezek* refers to bricks of dried cow dung while *qi* denotes manure pitchforked from a barn floor.
4. This point is in some ways a matter of perspective: *tezek* does burn less hot and thus less clean than coal. On the other hand, the smoke from *tezek* does not smell particularly unpleasant, while coal smoke smells terrible.
5. Roughly six tons of coal are needed to heat a single house through winter, though this varies depending on the size of the house and the harshness of the winter. With the cost of delivering a ton of coal to the village having jumped from around 9000KZT the year before to an expected 12,000KZT and with most people anticipating an unusually harsh winter, households in the village were faced with the need to raise from 70,000 to 80,000KZT (roughly, 600–660USD) in order to pay for their winter fuel supply.
6. In the Soviet era, local breeds like the fat-tailed sheep and the wild Argali sheep were cross-bred with imported Romney Marsh and Merinos sheep in an attempt to create crosses capable of both withstanding Central Asia's harsh winters and of producing high-grade fleeces (Dmitriev & Ernst 1989). This effort produced multiple different breed lines. Where I lived in Taraz, however, these cross-breeds were invariably simply termed as *merinos*, in distinction to the *Kazakh qoy*, or fat-tailed sheep.
7. I was many times witness to the link between fat and hospitality. When I first travelled to rural Kazakhstan, I was not yet used to the large amount of animal fat in the diet and in the heat of summer found it difficult to develop a taste for it. Yet if I were to choose a *shashlyk* skewer with more meat than fat, my host would sometimes take it away and replace it with another, fattier, selection. Similarly, when eating *beshparmaq*, my hosts would heap my section of the platter high with fat and hospitably urge me not to be embarrassed to eat it. It was not until the

weather turned cold in mid-September that I really understood just how generous this behaviour was.

8. The cost of *syrbaz* is, however, rather different for someone who owns a flock of sheep vs. someone who must purchase the lamb. For the villager without a flock, a young *gozy* is an extravagance, as only a little extra money would be required to purchase a sheep with far more meat. Someone who owns a flock, however, will start the summer with a large number of male lambs that must be either sold or slaughtered before the next lambing season. In this context, a male lamb is the *logical* animal to slaughter and the frequency with which *syrbaz* is prepared will be correspondingly higher. This fact, however, does not change the dish's status as a marker of special occasions, nor does it diminish the hosts' pride in being able to offer such a delicacy to guests.
9. All of the newspaper quotes in the paragraph are taken from a digest of articles on rising bread prices compiled by *Azatyq* in September 2007 (Zhengisqyzy 2007).
10. Far too many studies to list here, but see Finnegan (2002) for an extensive survey of the communicative consequences of shifts between media aural, visual, tactile, or olfactory; Jakobson (1971) and Voloshinov (2009) for brief theoretical discussions; and Keane (1994; 1995) for ethnographically detailed analyses.

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