The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality

Understanding Social and Cultural Complexity

Volume 1

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with

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still widely used as community-based mechanisms of support and coping with hardship in urban areas, where for many Georgians the availability of kinship connections became even more limited in the post-communist period.

1.11 ***Tanish-bilish*** (Uzbekistan)

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Tanish-bilish is an Uzbek term for networks/contacts used for extracting both material and non-material resources, or just for 'getting things done' (*ishingni bitirish*). *Tanish-bilish* literally translates as 'acquaintance-known', and may thus be considered a form of social capital. Schatz has described *tanish-bilish* as 'access networks', but claims they are often mistaken for clan networks (Schatz 2004: 62). In *tanish-bilish* networks, families and other forms of kinship play a primary role in terms of affiliation and strength of ties. However, other ties cross cut or overlap within the networks, including sub-ethnicities, regional identity, clan identity, professional belonging and various kinds of friendships (*tanish*, *dost*, *chin dost*). *Tanish* refers to an acquaintance, *dost* or *jora* to a friend and *chin dost* to a close friend.

Etymologically the term *tanish-bilish* consists of two full words: *tanish* (acquaintance), and *bilish*, which is a gerund form of the verb *bilmak* and can be translated as 'getting to know'. It can also be written in unhyphenated form – *tanish bilish.* Related terms in other Turkic languages include *tanish orqilu* in Kyrgiz, *tanis bilu* in Kazakh, *daniş biliş* in Turkmen, *tanysh-bilish* in Tatar, and *tanysh-bilish* in Kumyk (Alekseev 2011: 1).

The *Uzbek Explanatory Dictionary* (2007: 664) defines *tanish-bilish* as, 'Individual(s) who know each other and have some degree of contact' ('*Bir-birini tanijdigan va ma'lum jihatdan aloqa munosabati bor shahs(lar)*'). It gives the following example of usage: 'Well, doctor, nowadays whichever institute/university you go to only the children of *tanish-bilish* pass the entrance' ('*Endi, dohtir, hozir qaysi institutga borsangiz, tanish-bilishning bolasi kiradi*'). The term can also be found in Uzbek sayings, proverbs and songs. The Uzbek proverb *Bir ko'rgan – tanish, ikki ko'rgan – bilish* can be translated as 'once seen is *tanish*, twice seen is *bilish*'. The meaning is that *tanish-bilish* can be established having met a person just once or twice. In contemporary Uzbek poetry one can also find such sayings as: 'one can buy *tanish-bilish* but not friends' ('*tanish-bilish sotib olishing mumkin, lekin do'strarni emas*'). The Uzbek film

Burilish featured a song called '*Tanish-bilish*', sung by Ruslan Sharipov and Dilshod Abdullaev, which included the lyric 'If one has *tanish-bilish* one can accomplish any task, achieve things and from there on, my friend, you handle it' ('*Tanish-bilish bular borki bitar har bir yumush, dostum buyogini ozing kelish*').

The term *tanish-bilish* is used both as a noun to refer to the networks themselves, and as a verb for describing the actions/exchanges involved. As an example of the former, the travel writer Christopher Alexander relates the following comment by a newly made local acquaintance, who offered to help Alexander when he was struggling to find a place to live (2009: 34):

> I understand that it is very difficult for you newcomers without *tanish bilish* here in our country, and yet you are our guests and you have come to help us. I have lots of *tanish bilish* and I will help you find a house. Come and live in my house until we find somewhere for you to live.

The term *tanish-bilish* may also be used as a verb for describing how something was achieved, for example, 'How did your daughter pass the university entrance exams, did you do *tanish-bilish* or did she enter by herself?' ('*Qanaqa qilib kirdi okishga qizingiz, tanish-bilish qildingizmi yo ozi kirdimi*?').

There are two important aspects of *tanish-bilish* networks, which are central to understanding their content and functioning principles. First, there is the hierarchical dimension of social relations. Generational differences often overlap with social status, which is known locally as *katta* (big) and *kichkina* (small). *Kichkina* refers to a person who is generally perceived to occupy a lower social position, and *katta* a higher one. Particular duties and responsibilities are expected of individuals according to their perceived status within a given community. For instance, younger females of any family are always expected to help and cannot appear in public: if they are guests they stay in either the kitchen or a separate room with the children and other young women. Elderly people are always respected, while young men are expected to earn money and support their families. Both of the terms are relative to the person or community by which the individual is perceived. In one relationship or context a person can be *kichkina* and in another *katta*. In both contexts the status of individuals depends on the social relations with others.

Second, there are the dimensions of strength and duration of social relations: superficial/short-term (*bardi-galdi*/come-go, *yuzaki*/

superficial, *vaqtincha*/temporary) and more intensive and long-term (*boshqacha, muhim*). These are based on various reciprocities: balanced (*qaytarish garak*), generalised (*ot dushi, savab, sadaqa*) and negative (*paydalanish*). In *bardi-galdi* (short-term) relations mainly two kinds of reciprocities are chiefly involved: *qaytarish garak* (balanced) and *paydalanish* (negative reciprocity), whereas in *muhim* (long-term, important) relations *ot dushi*, *qaytarish garak* (balanced) reciprocities predominate (see Sahlins 1972 for studies on reciprocity and exchange). '*Qaytarish garak*' is literally 'must be returned' and could be compared to a balanced reciprocity; *ot dushi*/from the soul (in other words, 'with pleasure') is synonymous to a balanced reciprocity; *savab* and *sadaqa* are part of religious almsgiving as an obligation of every Muslim (*har bir musulmon burchi*). *Paydanalanish* literally means 'to make use of' and can be compared to negative reciprocity; it has a negative connotation that resembles free-riding. These different types of reciprocities are important in any kind of exchange but particularly important to distinguish for *tanish-bilish* networks of exchange. For instance, if one uses the very important type of contacts in one's *tanish-bilish* then this would suggest a form of balanced reciprocity.

Tanish-bilish networks usually have a strategic character and are used to extract resources of various kinds while avoiding formal rules as much as possible, as well as to solve problems. They enable informal exchanges that resemble the Soviet practice of *blat*, inasmuch as exchanges are based on favours of different kinds and not limited to informal payments ('I scratch your back and you scratch mine') (Ledeneva 1998, 2006). *Blat* is described by Ledeneva as an informal exchange within personal and kinship networks, through which both material and non-material capital flow. Sometimes *tanish-bilish* is translated into Russian as *po blatu*, for instance in media reports.

One of the strategies used within *tanish-bilish* exchanges is what can be called the 'politics of naming'. This strategy involves naming a very influential person or key official within the relevant sphere/field where one needs to 'get things done' (*ishni bitqazish*) as a door opener or a problem solver. A typical example of this strategy is if one gets caught by traffic police in Uzbekistan. The first thing a driver does is demonstratively telephone someone either real and influential, or somebody fake who pretends to be an important person. The second step is to offer the phone to the police officer. If the strategy is successful the driver will be free to go without punishment; if it is not, more phone calls are made and as a last resort a bribe may be negotiated.

Informal networks have long played an important role at all levels of social and economic interactions not only in Uzbekistan but in Central Asia in general (Schatz 2004). Under Soviet rule they were particularly important as the elite was divided into regional clan groups, which played a decisive role in the political development of Uzbekistan. Although the Soviets influenced the social and political make-up of the Central Asian societies, undermining pre-Soviet social structures, they also had to work with those structures to some extent. Clanship together with other kinship and friendship networks played a crucial role in people's orientations within their professional and social lives, and in Uzbekistan in particular political leadership was designed around clans and regional belonging (Carlisle 1986).

Tanish-bilish networks are strongly based on the principle of patron–client relations. Clientelism governs these networks' efficiency. Eisenstadt and Roninger (1980: 48, 1984) identified such variables as hierarchy, asymmetry, inequality, autonomy, spirituality, power, kinship and friendship when analysing patronage and clientelism. The patron–client relations they described are the relations of power and asymmetry, which direct the flow of resources and structure societal relations. If the social status of a person who is seeking to use *tanish-bilish* is lower (*kichkina*) than that of the person providing the favour, then by definition the latter acts as a patron and the former as a client in this specific transaction. The same client and the same patron can very well exchange their roles depending on the circumstances and also depending on who is providing the service for whom.

Post-Soviet social and economic crises coupled with growing uncertainties about the future have led people to rethink their survival strategies and social navigation through societal and political systems. Trust networks of *tanish-bilish* served to support the needs of their members and reproduced social relations of patronage and clientalism. Regional groups which formed during Soviet rule (Carlisle 1986) have persisted as the basis of *tanish-bilish* networks. Since the state legal system and state administration collapsed or became defunct after the collapse of the Soviet Union, alternative (informal) systems of patron–client relations have served as an alternative space for 'getting things done' in post-Soviet Central Asia. The networks of *tanish-bilish* have filled the void left by the state legal system and state administration, to accommodate the basic needs of ordinary people, as well as 'getting things done' at the higher level of state administration and politics.