Eat, Drink, and Be Merry, and Damn the Dictatorship

Concepts and Conduct of Well-Being in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

Studies of well-being focus on physical attributes of the subject or subjects, and many focus on physical health. This article scrutinizes well-being from the standpoint of emotional contentedness. Rather than making claims about overall contentedness, my interest is in instantiating contentedness in ordinary situations based on 20 years of fieldwork. I suggest that we sometimes miss out on contentedness because we focus too much on a trying political or economic state. Because anthropologists tend to write about postsocialism as joyless and painful—owing to the collapse of communism and its replacement by authoritarianism—we also owe it to readers to document instances of the "good life." Using ethnographic narration, I offer portals to feasting, drinking, and field labors in villages to represent ordinary ways in which Uzbeks embody a *joie de vivre*. Dreary politics and economics aside, people do live their lives and take great pleasure in them.

Keywords

well-being – Uzbekistan – fieldwork – Soviet – post-Soviet – collective – *toi*s

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You know about Uzbeks: no matter how much we complain, at the end of the day, if there is something good and tasty cooking, we consider that life is pretty good.

—A friend who contacted me by e-mail in 2007 as I checked some points about village migration patterns with him.

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This essay scrutinizes well-being in Uzbekistan from the standpoint of emotional contentedness, drawing on my fieldwork experiences in Uzbekistan beginning in the early 1990s and extending through 2010. In this essay I consider local and particular aspects of physical and behavioral health as I understand how people in Uzbek villages experience and process them. The concepts that make the most sense to me in assessing well-being relate to emotional health as well as healthy behaviors. Thus they include notions such as being able to live and enjoy specific moments or occasions, the desire and ability to eat well, and savoring pleasure—including even simple acts, such as reminiscing about good times with old friends, or even sharing one's pride about the successes of children, siblings, etc.[1] Now, while it is entirely feasible to argue the universality here, the particular variation of how people act out, experience, or engage in well-being relates to the circumstances, conditions, and life experiences of this notion that people have shared in the villages where I worked. It is, simply, what we anthropologists consider to be the uniquely cultural way in which people of some place and at some time behave socially, and what it is that they seem to value or cherish in terms of their intercourse. Thus while it might seem improbable for most middle class, well-educated Americans or Europeans to find personal and communal well-being in a politically repressive society where average incomes are miniscule (meaning that when people actually draw a salary for their work they cannot use that salary to pay for all of the basic goods, such as foodstuffs, clothing, and fuel that we think salaries should cover month in and month out), where there are few jobs and limited opportunities to seek new types of work, and where people rarely dine out or are able to dabble in culinary explorations and experimentation. Despite what people may think, rural people enjoy having meals at marketplaces and in eateries, especially to eat kabobs or fried fish (foods ordinarily not prepared at home), and they value variety in their diets, including prepared foods that they could buy in the marketplaces

1 H. Godman, "Your Well-Being: More than just a State of Mind," *Harvard Health Blog*, March 6, 2013, http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/your-well-being-more-than-just-a-state-of-mind-201303065957 (accessed July 27, 2013); D. Montgomery, "Relations Made over Tea: Reflections on a Meaningful Life in a Central Asian Mountain Village," *Central Asian Survey,* 32, no. 4 (2013): 475–486.

and then serve or prepare at home—salads, sausages, canned goods, etc. Uzbeks do find satisfaction and well-being, and it is not necessarily because they are satisfied with difficult life conditions or any of the other factors, such as political repression, that we might find counter to the very notion of well-being. Rather, given historical experiences and a significant degree of routinization to conditions outlined above, I argue that taking pleasure in and "enjoying the moment" or moments appear to be much more focused on interpersonal encounters that have much to do with social intercourse, meal taking, and celebrations focused on the lives of people with whom one is most familiar. While I am not willing to argue that people among whom I worked favor conformism or only what is familiar necessarily, there is a certain sense of safety and stability in avoiding risks and exposing oneself to little known environments or experiences; it may be more universal than many of us care to imagine. To be certain, it has nothing to do with mature adults not wanting well paid work, not wanting to voice their opinions, own BMWs, computers, and flat screen televisions, the chance to vacation in Greece, or the desire to own a luxury home; villagers are well aware of all these things (many even are covetous!), but the idea of living well and enjoying one's life has plenty to do with desires and expectations tempered by the patterns of everyday existence—the things that their neighbors, relatives, and friends mainly do and do not have.

Rather than making claims about overall contentedness, my interest is in instantiating contentedness in ordinary situations based on experiences since the early 1990s. The *good life* that I aim to describe is situational, and the details that I discuss are not an attempt to characterize the permanent or lifelong condition of a person or his primary social group. The basis of this good life— well-being in the broadest sense—in the face of postsocialist stresses, political and economic, including authoritarian fear and chronic unemployment, stems from strong collectivist values and generations-old experiences of perseverance.2 In speaking of *collectivist values*, I do not mean to imply a "village mentality" of an isolated peasant or any such antiquated romanticism about rural

2 It is worth mentioning in this context that the cumulative social hardships of Soviet life also reverberate at the nitty-gritty and communal level in early Soviet literature, captured by novelists such as Andrei Platonov and Feodor Gladkov. From an American cultural perspective, it is not easy to understand or appreciate the attitude and comportment of rural Uzbeks and other Soviet agrarian peoples, which we may be quick to judge as docile or servile under conditions that seem oppressive and miserable. Thus there are these other perspectives we would do well to see when we think of the "good life," or the things that make life pleasurable and fun from one time to the next. See B. Kerblay, *Modern Soviet Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); J. Millar, "The Household Sector: The View from the Bottom," in E. Hoffmann and R. Laird (eds), *The Soviet Polity in the Modern Era* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1984), 529–562; Fitzpatrick 1999, P. Fritzsche, "On the Subjects of Resistance," *Kritika*: *Explorations in*

life. What I mean, instead, is that people in the farming villages where I have lived and worked think more about their immediate social groups and net- works when times are especially difficult. Rather than going off on their own or simply looking out for themselves as individuals, they consider those to whom they are tied through kinship and social relations. Of course, this may be changing as millions of people have left and are leaving villages for work in cities and abroad. How the process of labor migration has, is, or will affect collectivist values remains unclear, but even here a desire for well-being and a better life is an integral factor leading to the decision to migrate.

Despite many hardships and many open expressions of dissatisfaction with the order of things—the order of the day—people do not easily succumb or let themselves be overwhelmed by conditions or experiences over which they posit that they have little control. To contextualize the hardships of daily living, I am discussing the frustration over low wages and infrequently paid salaries, the continued forced production targets on many farms set by authorities, the inability of farmers to buy land or grow what they wish, problems with basic transportation, getting their children into schools, needing their school- children and college-age children to work selling petty goods, and so on. Perhaps in reckoning life's issues and conditions in this manner, rural Uzbeks can find joy and pleasure in the cotton fields in August, in front of the television in the evening, preparing a wedding dowry that requires the help of neighbors, going shopping at a nearby city bazaar, or simply gathering with work colleagues on a weekend in the spring to eat, drink, joke and reminisce. Perhaps it is too general or too sanguine to declare that people look for affirmation and for goodness in most interactions and activities. Similarly, it seems that it is just as crude and unaware—and lacking cross-cultural awareness—that the materialist conditions of life and even some of the newer postsocialist ideo- logical conditions determine and fix massive unhappiness, hence overall depression or malaise. Because anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists have a tendency to write about postsocialist Central Asian life as joyless and painful—owing to factors such as the collapse of communism and its replacement by authoritarianism and oligarchic capitalism or outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence—we also owe it to colleagues and general readers to document instances of the "good life." I declare this neither because I think that many authors3 lack subtle and nuanced views of the totality of Central Asian

Russian and Eurasian History, 1, no. 1 (2008): 147–152; V. Tishkov, "us and Russian Anthropology: Unequal Dialogue in a Time of Transition," *Current Anthropology*, 39, no. 1 (1998): 1–18.

3 C. Werner, "Gifts, Bribes, and Development in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Human Organization*, 59, no. 1 (2000): 11–22; C. Harris, *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan*

social life nor merely to balance a kind of negativity, but because the "good life" is just as much a part of everyday reality for ordinary people as depictions of hardship and suffering. Ordinary people do not occupy themselves all day long with senses of hardship and repressive policies of a given regime.

In employing ethnographic narration, this essay offers portals to feasting, drinking, field labors, and social time spent in farming villages to represent ordinary ways in which Uzbeks embody a *yasash istiyoqi/shodu-hurram hayot* (variations on the phrase "zest for life") Clearly these vignettes that I discuss reflect a degree of arbitrariness, but they also are representative of how well- being emerged through shared experiences. They are events or times that I recall well, and when thinking about what well-being is about in the life of a person in ways concrete and situational these are recollections that sprang easily to mind.

Of course, to reflect on an occasion in the cotton fields, a wedding preparation feast, an impromptu meal while conducting fieldwork, an afternoon swimming in a canal or a river, or socializing at the auto mechanic's shop, I also have to be conscious of my own presence. Was I, as a guest, the cause, or in some way instrumental, in those occasions becoming spontaneously mirthful? Being self-reflective, one is cautious not to extrapolate my experience to be their experience. But I recall passing by these sorts of happenings, or coming into such experiences already in progress, and there appeared to be plenty of laughter before I was on the scene.

Conversely, it is also possible that these same kinds of occasions can be a source of conflict, anger, disputation, and/or complaining. Nevertheless, for people who do not necessarily spend significant time away from their familiar places, who usually are in contact with others whom they have known all of their lives and with whom they interact frequently and in numerous capacities, these times spent with close ones represent relaxation (*dam olish vaqti*) and supportive engagement. For example, whereas one may not think of cot- ton fields in this manner, especially given what we have learned of the Uzbek cotton economy and the conditions for the peasant farmers who make it what it is, many village residents spend hours of every day during harvest season joking, enjoying themselves, and making the best out of what appears to the

(London: Pluto Press, 2004); M. Reeves, "Travels in the Margins of the State: Everyday Geography in the Ferghana Valley Borderlands," in J. Sahadeo and R. Zanca (eds), *Everyday Life in Central Asia Past and Present* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 281–300; R. Zanca, *Life in a Muslim Uzbek Village: Cotton Farming after Communism* (Belmont, ca: Wadsworth, 2011); M. Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh* (Pittsburgh, pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

outsider as unremitting drudgery.4 On the whole, I am arguing not that rural Uzbek senses of well-being are all that unique, or based on some phenomena that the reader would find unquestionably foreign, but that well-being really is found in all of those little, intricate spaces and moments of ordinary life. To be blunt, relative poverty and relatively harsh politics do not necessarily make people unhappy. And as a matter of fact, the people with whom I work pay far less attention to conditions over which they feel they exercise little control. They are not eliding brutal aspects of postsocialist Uzbek life, and here I am not declaring that the ordinary rural Uzbek does not care or makes his peace with the conditions that obtain. What I am arguing is that people do not allow themselves to be consumed by the many negative changes involved in dissolving the Soviet system and destabilizing lives economically and politically.

In the Beginning

Scholars of Central Eurasia spend a lot of time writing about and discussing political and religious issues (very often intertwined topics) and how they affect people's lives, mainly because we are very interested in these issues our- selves.5 Perhaps we read too much into politics and faith because we seek to see a reality of hardships objectively and because we think that ordinary people are fixated on religion and politics. I came to see things in this way because they are proverbial bread-and-butter issues for Central Asian people, to say nothing of issues for a proposed eternity. To be sure, scholars of Central Asia reason that these are the potential tinderboxes. One firebrand too many, one more political restriction, or one more tax increase in a world turned so onerous for so many and revolution or civil war might ensue. After all, people do

4 Zanca, *Life in a Muslim Uzbek Village*.

5 A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); D. Montgomery, "*Namaz*, Wishing Trees, and Vodka: The Diversity of Everyday Religious Life in Central Asia," in J. Sahadeo and R. Zanca (eds), *Everyday Life in Central Asia Past and Present* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 355–370; R. Zanca, "Fearing Islam in Uzbekistan: Islamic Tendencies, Extremist Violence, and Authoritarian Secularism," in M. Steinberg and C. Wanner (eds), *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies* (Washington, dc and Bloomington: Woodrow Wilson Center/Indiana University Press, 2008), 247–280; J. Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: An Anthropology of Moral Reasoning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); T. Trevisani, *Land and Power in Khorezm: Farmers, Communities and the State in Uzbekistan's Decollectivization Process* (Berlin: lit Verlag, 2011); M. Sancak, "Economic and Social Change in Post-Soviet Rural Uzbekistan" (PhD diss., University of Zurich, 2012).

have breaking points. One hopes that before long we will dedicate our reflections to writing about how religion and politics motivate and engage the sub- jects of our research while examining our own motivations as carefully. It is worthwhile to think through the assumptions we bring to our field sites as much as we should reconsider our agendas, lest we affirm what we presuppose we will find.

My early outlooks on Uzbekistan very much stemmed from my 1980s experiences as a student in Russia and Ukraine. To be sure, I am comparing Uzbekistan to Russia and Ukraine because of all the shared Soviet experiences that partly constituted a Soviet culture. I had an avid, maybe obsessive, interest in what I considered to be the heightened nature of a late-Soviet political reality that seemed full of ordinary interest and engagement with changing political and cultural developments—the *glasnost* era.

During the 1980s, I considered Soviet life to be centered much more on visceral and existential political concerns than was the case back in the United States. Soviet citizens seemed to talk more about Cold War issues than my friends and family back home, and so much of the socializing that I was introduced to—and loved—included lots of political humor (recondite at first to be sure, but then quickly accessible). It occurred to me that people whom I got to know loved to joke and laugh about the regrettable state of their country's political economy and leadership. Scholars have written about humor or the *anekdot* (joke) in ways that demonstrate how vital it was as a way to express veiled dissent or simple rebellion against the ideological strictures of main- stream Soviet sociopolitical life.6 And by dint of being American, it seemed impossible to imagine myself as a cross-cultural subject without constant forays into political discussions. Why this should have been the case likely had much more to do with the superpower rivalry of the Cold War, and the fact that the USSR bombarded its citizens with political propaganda in ways that simply were more direct and voluminous than in the United States. This included slogan boards and slogan signs hung from every residential building, lamppost, and factory, as well as on boards set up along major roadways.7 Naturally, there

6 E. Draitser, "Soviet Underground Jokes as a Means of Popular Entertainment," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 23, no. 1 (1989): 17–25; A. Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the *Anekdot*," *Public Culture*, 9, no. 2 (1997), 161–188; B. Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-Century Soviet and Russian History in Anecdotes* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005).

7 This political or propaganda signage is alive and well in Central Asian countries, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. There is virtually no difference from the Soviet period, save that communist ideology has been replaced by respective nationalist ideologies, and many elements of communist politics remain, e.g., "The [ruling] party and the people are one."

were all manners of socializing about other topics, too, such as literature, fine arts, sports, travel to other parts of the world, nature, and the environment. And despite many, somewhat embarrassing situations wherein Soviet citizens declared realms of their lives as inferior to the United States, there were also declarations of pride in what locals considered to be the achievements and accomplishments of their country. Soviet citizens willingly compared their products and consumer goods with anything and everything Westerners brought on their visits—from watches to clothing, sunglasses, footwear, can- dies, and snack items (and how these last two were packaged). They under- stood the significance of foreigners—ordinary people—coming to visit them, and their own knowledge that it was virtually impossible for them (youth in particular) to spend money and travel as Western youth could and did. Nevertheless, Soviet citizens expressed pride in their "cultured" lives—their education, their fine arts opportunities, and the achievements that their country had made a superpower—militarily, technologically, and so forth.

What this meant when I first conducted fieldwork in Uzbekistan in 1993 was that I assumed I would still face many of the suspicions and concerns about Westerners that had informed people's worldview since the Cold War. I felt I would be welcomed superficially, but people would also be wary of my questions and actions. And while I had hoped to anticipate some changes because of the Soviet collapse and the establishment of a new country with its own brand of independence, I reasoned that it would still be too early to expect entirely new ways of thinking about relations toward Americans.

But in Uzbekistan from the early 1990s, the discourse over political subjects from the point of view of rural citizens—hot and heavy to be sure—took a turn for what I can only describe as more depressing than what I had experienced in the 1980s in Russia and Ukraine. The most striking comment that people would make to me was that I had "arrived at the wrong time," as if I should get back into my time machine and set the needle to 1975. The mid- to late 1970s (the height of Brezhnev's "Golden Age") were the reference point because many people would say that this had been the cornucopia, or as Uzbeks enjoyed verbally and visually demonstrating—*serob* followed by a thumb dragged across the throat—to represent the time of good living.8 Recently, Natalya Chernyshova has captured this sentiment with reference to

8 Even before the Soviet Union had actually collapsed, the historian Geoffrey Hosking captured this sense of a "Golden Age" characteristic of the Brezhnev years toward the tail end of the Gorbachev period. Even on the cusp of disintegration, Soviet people knew the period had represented greatest abundance and relative security from want and hunger. See G. Hosking, *The Awakening of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, ma: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Soviet remembrances of what was available and what could be purchased, along with the general stability of life.9

That the early to mid-1990s formed one of the most trying economic periods since World War II was attested to constantly by people whom I met throughout the country, not just the in countryside. People wanted to demonstrate in all manner of ways that their sense of well-being had been adversely disturbed. People could no longer travel about the USSR freely (it still existed in their minds!), they could not send their children to summer camps for free, and they had to think long and hard and plan even harder to entertain lavishly—a focal point of social life. While I say political subjects, what was described was an economics- centered litany of hardships that shaped an attitude about the new political dispensations being a profound yet—so many hoped—temporary flop. In this sense, economics and politics hardly formed separable topics. The politicians had not started to act differently, and in fact increasingly the political system became less and less free in comparison to the *glasnost* period of the mid-1980s until 1992. What I overlooked in my zeal to document the pits of Soviet collapse was the recognition that ordinary Uzbeks were not neophytes to trying times, and the blows from collapse may have been cushioned by their viewing it as yet another collective experience of adversity. Collective, in this sense, means that in villages where there was a basic "equity of hardship" most, if not all, experienced these hardships in very similar ways, and in ways that allowed even acquaintances to relate empathetically to one another. While triumphalism and progress characterized the state leaderships' narrative of Soviet life to ordinary people during the twentieth century, these citizens clearly knew the intermittent times of prosperity and stability against the long periods of destitution and bare necessities. A shared experience of rack and ruin may or may not leave people the sense that they are not to blame for misery, but rather that this is a consequence of their inept but barely assailable system. More simply, people resigned themselves to a system that featured pitfalls because they could not imagine changing it.

Hindsight shows that it is easy to neglect local senses of a good life when it seems much more ethnographically relevant to document loss and lamentation of and for a way of life. Anthropology's pioneers of functionalism usually appeared to analyze societies by institutions and practices that did not connect to the wider relations of colonialism and dominance of which they were a part.10 Influenced by such foundational studies, some who research post-Soviet

9 N. Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

10 In this context I am clearly thinking about the classic studies of Andaman Islanders, Trobrianders, and Nuer written by British anthropologists Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, and Evans-Pritchard.

Central Asia are too focused on external factors beyond the micro-level of villages, towns, and city neighborhoods to the detriment of appreciating and describing how ordinary people make their own lives and the lives of those within their social worlds pleasurable and worthwhile.11 Bearing in mind that many eyewitnesses to Central Asian societies have painted so bleak a picture in the period immediately following the collapse, it is salutary to reflect on not necessarily alternative readings of culture but certainly parallel opinions, habits, actions, and events that bespeak good living in hard times. Part of ethno- graphic maturity is realizing that we should pay more attention to the place of collectivism and socially negotiated experiences of disappointment because they enable people to keep tyranny and poverty from crushing life.

Having mentioned collectivism as a rural ethos, I do not wish to imply there is something akin to "village think" that all residents of given places share. On the contrary, my fieldwork stints always reinforced varieties of outlooks and contradictory positions. When a rural dentist, for example, has to sell produce, or when a schoolteacher tries to marry off children sooner rather than later because there are no job prospects, such people may not be inclined to dwell long on personal shortcomings when they understand that they are not the only professionals tasked with such trials. These predicaments usually are understood to be mainly beyond the control of the person experiencing them, and one's neighbors and friends are likely to be in similar straits. They have a stronger tendency to realize that the wrecking of their way of life was far from their faults as men, fathers, professionals, or any other identity they might hold.12 Thus, the early 1990s marked a transitional period for Soviet citizens inured to familiar hardships of the Soviet type, who now found themselves in hardships that seemed at once unnecessary and overwhelming. From this anthropologist's viewpoint, it seemed disastrous in the common imaginary.

The Need for a Drink or Two

It is common for people with even a passing familiarity of Central Asian life and cultures to express confusion over the fact that Central Asians today, by and large, consume alcoholic beverages despite the fact that they are Muslims. Leaving aside the official Soviet policy of atheism, and the Soviet proclivity to

11 P. Salzman, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theory* (Long Grove, il: Waveland Press, 2001).

12 Curious readers may learn much more about the case of the dentist and the schoolteacherby reading Zanca, *Life in a Muslim Uzbek Village*, 135–137.

encourage a certain degree of alcohol consumption in Central Asia, especially among would-be members of the *Komsomol* and Communist Party, the com- mon confusion that I mention also stems in part from the utter lack of experience of living throughout the vast Islamic world on the part of non-Muslims. Those who are familiar and experienced realize, of course, that there is a gulf of difference among individuals about what they claim to be their beliefs and practices as opposed to what it is they actually do.

In the Uzbek villages of the Fergana Valley where I conducted much of my fieldwork, mainly men drank, and many would do so with abandon and excess. To be sure, there are active struggles going on throughout these villages. It is not merely a matter of reformed drinkers who may have found God, or religious conservatives admonishing people not to drink; there are plenty of nondrinkers who simply cannot tolerate some of the most damaging effects alcohol has on those who are unable or unwilling to control what would appear to almost any observer as deleterious effects on personal health and social relationships. In other parts of Uzbekistan where I have worked, including Navoii and Khorezm, one may see people drink even more openly, and they often seem to find no incompatibility between their Muslim faith and their desire to drink alcohol.

Just as most rural people do not take their meals alone, they also do not drink alone—at least none but the most hard–core alcoholics. Drinking beer, *portvine* (port wine), or vodka/*aroq* most often is bound up with getting the high that eases the burdens of life, that makes socializing easier, perhaps more fun, and that can hardly be absent when an occasion is called for to celebrate something, such as a birthday, the acquisition of a car, or some stroke of good fortune. One drinks when an old friend comes calling, one drinks after a day of shopping and when encountering male neighbors or colleagues. Men set time aside to drink, and they seldom have just a drink or two. Much more common would be drinking to inebriation.

Curiously, most village men will not assent readily to drinking. To be sure, they wish to drink, but decorum demands that a person show reluctance or even the histrionics of a violent refusal; a friend will then "force" booze upon you. This is an Uzbek way of showing that "we're really not drinkers; we don't really like drinking." It is a show of cultivation to demonstrate that one is not looking to drink; rather, circumstances and company more or less force one to conform. Men are showing that "we are Muslims, but the Soviet system taught us this vice, and we cannot easily extricate ourselves from it."13 Drinking

13 These are exactly the kinds of comments men would offer to me just before they imbibed. It would be totally unseemly to suggest that it is a good idea to get vodka, or that one volunteers that he really wants a shot. It is a kind of forbidden act that necessitates dis- plays of feigned disapproval before men get down to *serious* drinking.

together invites social collusion. It is wrong in some ultimately moral sense, in the eyes of God, we might say, but the men of a social gathering are all in it together, and they are not harming anybody after all, just having a good time and taking it easy. Of course, people in rural settings make distinctions between those who are under control and those who lose control, those who may stay peaceful and those who may be prone to violence, and men, generally, are conscious of the strict national regulations regarding drunk driving. Drinking is a realm of the good life, and it can make life a little bit better, a little bit more relaxed, a little bit more enjoyable. Ironically or not, for my interlocutors it was inseparable from well-being.

Social scientists, broadly, and Central Asianists, specifically, have a hard time relating alcohol consumption as something acceptable, let alone as a social good.14 Yes, reasons are obvious, and they include making it easier to talk to others, to relax and unwind in social situations that one may have been uninterested in earlier, and the tendency to engage in and experience entertainment with greater pleasure. Moreover, but when many of us who have lived and worked in Central Asia recall pleasurable repasts, including laughter, conviviality, singing, and dancing, we think back to the relaxation and the let- ting go that booze fostered. Like many, I think back to feasts, chance encounters, celebrations, and a swim in some canal or river where vodka, cognac, beer, port wine, or other drinks made for all kinds of fun moments and intense camaraderie. They were occasions and moments when it struck me that field- work always entailed living just as much as it supposedly involved learning and figuring out the appropriate pathways and guidelines constitutive of culture. Under the influence, you can discuss topics as serious and dangerous as mis- guided crackdowns on religious practice, the lack of jobs, or as thrilling as romance, comical experiences of being abroad, or the farcical behavior of a neighbor. You while away an afternoon or an evening out in a field, in front of tv, or in a makeshift eatery, drinking and eating, telling stories, jokes, nodding off, but, above all, really enjoying the company, and appreciating that no amount of political repression or straightened finances can keep people focused on the negative—or at least not for lengthy periods of time, it would seem.

14 T. Levin, *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God: Musical Travels in Central Asia (and Queens, New York)* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996); D. Williams, "Grazing the Body: Violations of Land and Limb in Inner Mongolia," *American Ethnologist*,24, no. 4 (1997): 763–785.

It has actually taken me many years to shake off the tendency to moralize the conduct and behavior of the villagers I knew. Previously, it seemed necessary to make recommendations about public health, to prescribe correctives for debilitating social failures that perhaps resulted from and clearly seemed to sustain state collapse and poverty. Much seemed to bind together alcohol and the decline of the quality of postsocialist life. What has led me to rethink earlier concerns and convictions are remembrances of some crucially insightful and effervescent experiences that permit me to think of the "good life" in ways perhaps beyond my own criteria.

I recall a wedding preparation party—*sabzi qirish*—that involved 40–50 men at a bride's home not far from Andijan. I got to learn a lot about one man's ties to his social network, whom he could depend on for goods, from whom he expected manual labor support, which consanguineal or affinal kin had roles to play, who raised his ire and engendered his loathing, and whether or not all men would have similar expectations were the daughters to wed. On that day, from mid-afternoon until well into the evening, men worked hard on various tasks, including, of course, meal preparation. Because I sensed the feast preparation in this instance was a kind of unalloyed pleasure domain, I slowly began learning more about it.

As nighttime wore on, the participants relaxed and turned to lounging about, eating, and reminiscing about their shared experiences as karakul sheep specialists on the area's collective farms. Surreptitiously, bottles emerged and teacups were rinsed and passed back around. The men went through their usual bouts of spirited but theatrical protests about the prospect of *gaz* (vodka) filling their cups. Characteristically, Uzbek men, as at least nominally Muslim, do not like to appear to enjoy the prospect of drinking alcohol, thus the theatricality. Toasts ensued followed by sips of compote or yoghurt or a bite of garlic, and we were all off, ascendant. After endless rounds of chatter and drinks and uncontrollable laughter, I lit a pipe that I had started smoking that summer. Well, the partiers would not let me get away with my unintended selfish act of smoking the pipe by myself. Probably 20 men took drags, and then asked me to pass around my tobacco pouch. Who said it smelled like chocolate, who said perfume, decidedly not *makhorka*—low-grade Russian tobacco. And then they exchanged jokes and ripostes with one another about why they should smoke pipes in Uzbekistan, or why they could not get such tobacco, and so on. All of the remarks, comments, and verbal jousts were accompanied and followed by interminable laughter. Here everybody was sharing in the work, the joys and pleasures together, and they were drinking together, and this was an occasion wherein life was anything but a thing to be lamented.

When It Looks Nothing Like a Duck

After years of being jaded by my permanent "guest" (*mekhmon*) status in so many Uzbek homes, it became easy to take lavish meals for granted. Similar to the peoples of neighboring countries and all of Central Asia, really, Uzbek people place a premium on making guests feel welcome, comfortable, and fed; there is no way to emphasize this last factor strongly enough! In Uzbekistan people also believe that guests add prestige to a home, to the family hosting the guest, especially if the guest happens to be foreign, even an American. People are often self-aware that showing hospitality to guests is an ingrained part of their social structure rooted both in Muslim ethics as well as in long- held Turkic traditions based on nomadic steppe and mountainous existences. However, one also has to be mindful of idealizing this relationship because in time various types of reciprocation are expected from guests, including money, goods, household services, and even doing special favors, especially if the guest is foreign or travels much. The guest may be asked to procure something from a town or city or implored to please send particular things once he has returned home. Although one's status, anthropologist or not, never really changes from being a guest, in time it is natural for a long-term guest to be increasingly incorporated into the family or household structure, becoming, for example, an elder brother (*aka*) or an older relative's son (*oghil*). In time, too, one becomes, or can become, part of the household's network of joking and all manner of other emotional and social relationships. Obviously, anthropologists have known for many generations now how precarious the participant–observer status becomes as he tries—usually unsuccessfully—to avoid getting entangled in webs of family likes, dislikes, and disputes that necessarily serve to color his view of all types of village people as well as the neighborhood itself in which he lives and exists.15

In this spirit, there were countless occasions when I wanted to be anything but a dinner guest, mainly because I had no desire to overeat. On the flipside, I recall many occasions about strategizing with hosts to figure out where we could go and *be* guests for the obvious reason that the larder at home was depleted. In time I began to think of this as going in search of a mini-potlatch. And in time, I also considered that many people in villages enjoyed weddings not necessarily so much because betrothals were exciting or that they were

15 R. Zanca, "Intruder in Uzbekistan: Walking the Line between Community Needs and Anthropological *Desiderata*," in H. De Soto and N. Dudwick (eds), *Fieldwork Dilemmas: Anthropologists in Postsocialist States* (Madison, wi: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 153–171.

anxious to dance, but because it was a great opportunity to get a hot meal and some booze in addition to socializing with co-villagers.16

Unlike weddings and life-cycle parties (known as *toi* in Uzbek) with their lavish outlays of food and beverages, an experience with "duck soup" changed my perspective on having a riotously grand time despite some abject conditions.

In the late 1990s, I spent some months working on livestock collectives, mostly surveying with shepherds in Navoii. After a long, torrid day of inter- viewing, my team was sort of chaperoned into a farmstead where the under- standing was that we would have a meal and sleep over. At that point in my research, one long day blended into another, and I was at the point where I could really have cared less where I spent the night or what I was fed. Generally, I enjoyed the companionship of the rugged pastoralist personnel I was getting to know in Navoii and I found the work engaging. However, on that day despite the heat and dryness, I was hungry and looking forward to dinner and bed. As talk turned to our dinner, the men asked me if I liked duck soup. I instantly got excited by the prospect of enjoying a bowl of soup as opposed to eating the usual pilafs and the regional specialty, *tandir kabob*. When the bowls of soup were carried into the room where we sat making small talk, several of the guys started smiling and laughing. I couldn't figure it out. Before us the host's servers placed bowls of cool water. Amid the water bowls were laid a number of loaves of stale bread. Then with a degree of solemnity and mostly silence, one of the hosts began breaking the stale bread into small pieces and adding them to the water. When my serving was offered, I simply asked: "What's this?" Observing my reaction and obvious crestfallen wariness, the man who had served said, with a straight face and no hint of emotion, "Duck soup." At that all six or so of the others with whom we were eating split their sides laughing and rolled around howling. Tears streamed down their cheeks, and I soon had to begin nodding my head slowly and smiling, too. Yes, the joke was on me. Stale bread is not something one throws away. Here was a method of consumption in the hot weather. Stir it around in the cold water,

16 Of course, I have no way of knowing if this makes sense or not, but it's a notion worth entertaining, I think, because weddings in villages are ubiquitous from August until November, and the betrothed themselves rarely seemed to matter to many of my informants when I would ask where we were going and who was marrying whom. The main point seemed to be to have a good time. Furthermore, in Chicago a visiting Uzbek Fulbright scholar from Khojent once declared to me, as we were leaving a wedding, that weddings were better in Tajikistan than Chicago because more meat was served at wed-dings in Tajikistan.

soften it up, and then chew it. Of course, later we ate a real meal, but throughout the rest of my stay in the area the men connected to my research work loved to torment me with a recollection of the incident. Whether or not the story really reflects poverty or a mixture of it and resourcefulness, my point is to illustrate how much fun was to be had by standing one's expectation—in this case, a foreign anthropologist's—on its head.

Out in the Fields

I had an Uzbek primer in grad school that was filled with dull dialogues; many would be of the following type: "*Dalada nima bor?*" "*Dalada beda poiia bor*," or "*Dalada traktor bor*." ("What's [growing] in the field?" "In the field, there's a clover patch." "There's a tractor in the field.") Even though I knew that I wanted to work in rural areas, I assumed the textbook would have no relevance to life out there. I was wrong. I can hardly remember a day without someone invoking the field, the literal field, whether to go there and weed, or to pasture live- stock, to collect clover, to look for one's mom or brother, to pick cotton, or to do work in tens of other ways. After all, fieldwork is what farming people do.

Whereas the excerpted phrases from the Uzbek primer clearly reflected simplicity and repetition for the beginner, it gives me pause to think about how boring and insignificant it seemed on first comprehension, but how relevant it became once I was in Uzbekistan. Such questions and responses reveal a society centered on shared rather than individualistic experiences. After all, farms and farming life were not a matter of individual farmers and their families, but of large agricultural enterprises peopled by hundreds if not thousands of people. All of these collectivized folk more or less had to be interested in these very general questions for the simple reason that if things were bad in that large and seemingly anonymous field out there, then they were just as likely to be bad in your collective farm village and home, materially speaking. Everyone in the rural communities necessarily has a stake in the welfare of the fields. The more consideration one gives this, the more one may come to realize and appreciate the degree to which educated urban people from most Western countries would even think to consider such a question or questions revolving around the state of a field and its crops as being relevant and actually interesting to the normal course of events.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars also started learning about the terrible nature of cotton work and cotton harvesting for Uzbeks, owing to the spraying of pesticides and defoliants, miserly earnings, and child labor. The dire conditions were often reported in the Soviet press, such as *Pravda Vostoka*,

as well as the translations provided by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Indeed, I witnessed all of these elements and practices, but I also learned that life during the cotton growing cycle, and whether one was out in the fields to work on cotton or something else, featured much that incorporated playful- ness, mirth, flirtation, insouciance, and even the thrill of sabotage.

As a fieldworker studying field work, I tried to be a dutiful brigade worker, but I was awful at picking cotton. In time I stopped serving as an object of entertainment of one sort, and just kind of hung around to talk and to see. While ambling up and down the furrows and designated sectors of the cotton growing area, boys would tell me which girls they liked, and women would regale me with tales about the uselessness of men who were playing cards on *suri*s (raised platforms on metal frames for eating, recreation, and sleeping) below the shade of willows. Children marched out to pick under their teachers' guidance and did some chores, but mostly ran wild till lunch was served, and pickers cackled and hooted as some threw dirt and rocks into cotton gunny sacks to increase the amount of kilos "picked."

Now, there is no pretending that field labors involve innumerable hours of poorly remunerated drudgery for work that most people do only because they say it is *majbur* (forced), but one also should try to see the fields as a sort of "total social space." Simply, a cotton field is not just a place of labor, but of social life, too. Field labors are not a bounded domain of village life, alienated and apart from sociability, fixated on productivity and order, and carefully examined by powerful agents ready to discipline and fire those who fail to deliver. Rather, the field is multisectored and differentially monitored. Notwithstanding the withering efforts on the part of the dictatorship to extract more and punish the farms that do not reach production targets, villagers' fearknows limits, too.

My Neighbors and Me against the World

Given the certainty of mortality, there are ways to focus on the transcendent over the mundane even when the latter strongly affects the former. As a major factor of well-being, people where I worked spent inordinate amounts of time, thought, and resources on life-cycle celebrations (*tois*)—events that authorities and academics considered profligate or wasteful during the Soviet period and beyond.17 It took me years to realize I judged such celebrations as wasteful

17 N. Lubin, *Labour and Nationality in Soviet Central Asia: An Uneasy Compromise* (Princeton, nj: Princeton University Press, 1984).

myself, and that my conceit has a lengthy precedent in anthropology goingback at least as far as arguments about the Northwest Coast Native Americans.18Naturally, many of us do not think long or hard about our own wasteful or profligate practices that also seemingly serve little practical purpose, let alonepractical benefit to ourselves and others. Perhaps one of the easiest manifestations of what I am trying to make a connection to is the proverbial party at afriend's house that has no really express purpose other than friends wanting toget together. In these situations, a group of friends, and friends of friends,assemble in one home or apartment. Everyone arriving feels a sometimesunexpressed obligation to buy beverages—often alcoholic—or snacks, a sidedish, or a dish that serves anywhere from four to twelve people. Since numerous guests do the same, it is inevitable that many beverages and foodstuffs willgo unconsumed. While beverages, if unopened, usually can be stored for long,they may be consumed later, or even recirculated during another similar occasion. But this is not true of many of the foodstuffs. Invariably, much food, hencedisposable income and resources simply are wasted. And what was the greatpurpose in all this? Clearly, it was not religious or of an identifiable life-cyclenature. No essential bonds necessarily were cemented. After all, there reallywere not even clearly demarcated boundaries to inaugurate and properly end the gathering. Nevertheless, on many levels we do invest these occasions meaningfully in our societies and in our individual lives. If nothing else, wethink positively about social bonds—perhaps in the form of friendships—that these occasions support and maintain.

Generally, then, this is not to say there are not practices that are wasteful and profligate, that cause people long-term debt, for example, even when they wish to avoid such an outcome. But the outlays of wealth needed for ritual feasting and celebrations are almost always part of a much more complicated web of social relationships. These relationships are necessary in the lives of individuals *qua* individuals and for individuals as part of larger social net- works—from nuclear family membership to extended patrilineal kin groups. The materialist hardships they often engender for people also place them in solid social standing within their lived environments. In this sense, sustaining—even via a semblance—or maintaining well-being plays a

18 I am talking here, of course, of the potlatches, and the seemingly endless attempts of Canadian authorities in particular to view the great feasting and giveaways on the part of the Bella Kula, Kwakiutl, and Tsimshian peoples, among others, as being wasteful, owing to these peoples "primitive" mindsets. Sally Snyder wrote of this in stirring detail. See S. Snyder, "Quest for the Sacred in Northern Puget Sound: An Interpretation of Potlatch," *Ethnology*, 14, no. 2 (1975): 149–161.

significant role for a person's sense of self-worth and desire to be like others. We are often remiss in seeing or judging social rituals, such as weddings or funerals, from a purely materialist vantage when in fact the economics of these events should not be separated from many other facets or domains of societalrelationships.

To be sure, villagers whom I spoke to about *toi*s had a variety of opinions, and people showed an awareness of other cultural approaches to these events. Some would say they were proverbial matters of custom and tradition, religious importance, or even that the events embodied a self-aware Uzbek sense of hospitality, socialization, and a basic exuberance for celebration. In retrospect, I pondered over a lot of clichéd positions about the need to create joyous and colorful times in the depths of economic ruin and the loss of a somewhat secure and stable future. If one were to approach the phenomenon of a marriage or circumcision *toi* from an historical perspective, it is reasonable to understand that a degree of continuity in the structure of the event itself must be tempered by very different degrees of largesse allocated, foods and bever- ages consumed, and the very socializing activities of the *tois* themselves.19 Nevertheless, the larger issue or issues cohere in considering an affirmation of village life or society because you are helping to fulfill the ultimate purpose of being human—that is, to raise and cherish those whom you produced and who will immortalize you.

I know that it is also something of a cliché to talk about Uzbeks and children for researchers who have spent significant time studying Uzbekistan. After all, the language itself has umpteen numbers of aphorisms or sayings bespeaking the importance and necessity of having children. Simply, it seems impossible to consider an individual's well-being or sense of personal fulfillment without marriage and children. Of course, I am not arguing that married mothers and fathers enjoy pronounced states of well-being or senses of personal fulfillment *tout court*, but they are ideals of adulthood in ways that have changed markedly during the past few decades in the West. Certainly, people in Uzbekistan are aware of high birth rates, and many wish to restrict the number of children in marriage, but rural people still place a high priority on raising large families despite worsening economic conditions. By contrast, from the 1990s on birth rates have declined significantly in countries such as Italy, Spain, and Hungary. These declines in European marriage and fertility partly reflect thepoor economies in these countries.20

19 Ibid.

20 T. Sobotka, V. Skirbekk, and D. Philipov, "Economic Recession and Fertility in the Developed World," *Population and Development Review*, 37, no. 2 (2011): 267–306.

To save, to plan, to go into debt, to work countless hours arranging and pre- paring the necessities for well-considered *tois*, then, concern a kind of fulfillment that people generally do not derive from work or earning money, and the single-minded focus of making it work out right does take one's mind off the consideration of macro-politics, the prices of the bazaar, the lack of a job—as contradictory as this all may seem. It is not that these previous factors do not matter or do not weigh heavily. The concerns and choices that a person has to make to perform socially in an adequate way require huge sacrifices from per- son to person, and, in the end, they must trump the oppressions of the ordinary. Again, these mundane problems are shared with so many others, including neighbors, friends, relatives, and colleagues. What almost all of one's social network members will care much more about, however, is how one puts himself forward to announce and represent his family, and the joy he shows in presenting members of his family publicly while treating all of those who gather to honor and celebrate the host's child or children. Although Wolf referred to this as a "ceremonial fund" in peasant societies more than 40 years ago, he correctly understood the attention given to the "solidarity of the com- munity."21 Impoverished people understand, and they rarely blame the individual for his tough or dire material conditions. Thus, while people may complain about not being able to make a *toi* optimal in terms of its grandeur or lavishness, they will derive considerable satisfaction when they know that nearly who celebrated enjoyed themselves, and that they will hear comple- ments rather than complaints from attendees.

Conclusion

Enjoying one's life and thinking of the experiences of the "good life" have often seemed distant in many Western narratives of Central Asian societies. In this essay I reflected on my own experiences in which I emphasized bleakness as the reality of contemporary Uzbekistan based on late Soviet experiences of travel and research as well as personal interests. I used reflection to think about how students of Central Asian social life and readers of my work, especially, may see rural Uzbek life as joyless. By rethinking encounters I have had and situations I involved myself in, I ask readers to understand how deeply and richly life can be enjoyed (even if only situationally) despite material conditions and oppressive politics. Considering very ordinary occurrences—such as

21 E. Wolf, *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs, nj: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

feasting and drinking; the playing of a trick on a guest; the daily work and socializing in agricultural fields; and the planning for life-cycle events—I tried to show how good living contains an array of universal simplicities that often are strongly underlined by values and concerns (such as collectivism) that are much more local, and thus much more Uzbek in nature.