Making Marriages Modern: Marital Choice, Metrical Books, and the Papereality of Social Reform in the Inner Kazakh Horde, 1852-1876

Kimberly Powers, Ph.D. Candidate in History and Anthropology at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and a participant of the Summer Research Lab, gave the REEEC Noontime Scholars Lecture on July 1, 2014. The title of her lecture was “Making Marriages Modern? Marital Choice, Metrical Books, and the Papereality of Social Reform in the Inner Kazakh Horde, 1852-1876.” In the second half of the 19th century, the administrators of the Russian Empire tried to regulate marriages among the Kazakhs of the inner horde (who populated a region between the Volga and Ural Rivers). The new regulations revealed the ambivalent stance on Kazakh women’s status, the differences between Orthodox Russian and Muslim Kazakh definitions of marriage, and the use of documentation to record marriages in order to prove their validity.

During the 19th century, government authorities increasingly began to regard marriages from a strictly religious affair to a civil matter. Especially in the far reaches of the Russian Empire, they intended to create a more civilized and governable society by overseeing and modernizing marriages. They increased the supervision of marriages, and arbitrated more family and marital disputes. In 1835, they prohibited underage marriages, codifying that the minimum marriageable ages for women and men were 15 and 18, respectively. However, in practice, the prohibition of underage marriages was virtually impossible. Imams avoided recording the marriages until the couple reached the appropriate age. In keeping with bride-price arrangements, the couple began living together before they reached the legal marriageable age.

Moreover, the largest obstacle to enforcing the new marriageable age rule was that the Kazakhs did not see underage betrothals as violations of legal marriage, but were instead powerful social customs to tie the couple together.

In May 1862, the Russian government enacted Regulation 15234, which stipulated that men and women can marry whoever they choose without family intervention. It eliminated any ambiguities from the 1835 law, but it did not prevent underage betrothals because the Kazakhs and imams did not distinguish between marriages and betrothals.

Additionally, Regulation 15234 gave Kazakh women a method to challenge their underage marriages (arranged by their families) and petition for their ability to choose their own spouse. The women’s petitions were written in Russian and signed with a tamga, which revealed their clan identity; the women did not sign their names because they were illiterate. Obviously, since the women were illiterate, a third-party had written the document. This individual may have been a native district-level administrator, but there is not enough information to confirm that. From 1870 until 1876, the provisional authorities investigated underage betrothals and marital disputes. During the investigation of these disputes, witnesses were rarely consulted, and the information was frequently taken at face-value. Regulation 15234 became a way to reform marital practices through paperwork, but it did not actually change those practices in reality.

The more frequent use of paperwork resulted in the unquestioning reliance on metrical books to determine a marriage’s validity. Throughout the Russian Empire, metrical books recorded births, marriages, and divorces (for Jews and Muslims). They were the responsibility of local
religious clergy. Among the Orthodox (who believed that marriage was an indissoluble sacrament), metrical books were not standardized until the 1830s. What were once exclusively religious documents increasingly linked imperial subjects to government authorities. They became the only appropriate method for age and group identity.

Furthermore, the use of metrical books transformed private life cycle events into state affairs. It became the most trusted method for determining the legitimacy of a marriage. Local authorities used them to both evaluate a marriage’s validity (usually by examining the ages of the bride and groom) and whether the imam who celebrated the marriage had official state recognition. They downplayed the testimony of witnesses in marital disputes. Inner horde Kazakhs quickly accepted the use of metrical books and began adopting the state’s own Islamic discourse. Unlike in other regions of the Russian Empire, the authorities in the inner horde unquestioningly accepted metrical book data solely based on its materiality. In contrast, authorities in other regions examined metrical book data with a more critical eye.

The heavy reliance on metrical books exemplified the Russian Empire’s adoption of social reform that suited its image of modernizing social groups on the frontiers, groups that the imperial authorities wanted to enlighten and cultivate. Such reform attempted to work in the interest of victimized Kazakh women escape their illegal underage marriages through paperwork and formulaic petitions. However, all the record-keeping and documentation only revealed the disparity between the paper reality and the social reality within the empire.

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