Political culture and traditions in Central Asia
The “logic” of patrimony

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Introduction
One issue that has not been adequately addressed in the disciplinary history of Comparative Politics over the years is looking at political processes from a cultural perspective. This is more so true in transitional societies where sociocultural structure is deeply embedded in the governance processes. It is in this context that analysing political systems in these states without looking at the cultural milieu makes the study quite hollow (Ross 2009: 140–143; Dean 2000; Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Five states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) being the “cradle of an ancient civilisation” is a classic case in which sociocultural structures play an important role in shaping the political dynamics. In addition to the cultural factor, the geographical setting is also shaping the cultural matrixes of this region, which, in turn, contributes to the evolvement of a strong centralised political system. Some of the cognitive strands, like “perception”, “attitude”, “values” and “norms”, constitute the edifice of political culture, as defined by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, and “shape the perception of masses towards the political leadership” (Almond and Verba 1963). The crisis or stability of the political system of respective states is partly determined by interaction between informal elements and institutionalisation processes (Hall and Taylor 1996; Helmke and Levitsky 2004). The present study is an attempt to critically examine some of the aforementioned trajectories to outline how far perception of political leadership is rooted in political culture and geographical setting. Second, the chapter will look at whether there is any divergence or convergence among the Central Asian states in the pattern of leadership. Finally, it will shed light on how the present-day political leadership is lending legitimacy to their leadership, which is often premised upon “patrimony” (Collins 2006: 16–21).

Political transition, political culture and dynamic of post-Soviet political processes
In the middle of 20th century, two ideological debates confronted the domain of Comparative Politics: One was based on “institutional rationality”, and the other one tried to identify political systems more with a “cultural framework”. The dichotomy between these two
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approaches was aptly visible in the behavioural and post-behavioural schools of thought that became the dominant discourses in Comparative Politics. It is in this context that cultural politics has emerged as a major approach to study institutions (Easton 1969; Dean 2000). This approach gained more prominence in the path-breaking work of Verba and Almond titled *The Civic Culture*. The book provides an alternative perspective to approaching political institutions, in which both the authors posit that “sustainability of democracy” is largely determined by the level of “Civic Culture” prevalent in a political system. Civic Culture as defined by Verba and Almond implies a mix of political processes in which “tradition and modernity co-exist”, which, in turn, provides necessary substance to the political system. In the words of both the authors, this phrase implies “a pluralistic culture based on persuasion and communication, a culture of consensus and diversity, a culture that permitted change but moderated it … [and helps in] ‘consolidating’ democracy” (Almond and Verba 1963: 7). The Princeton Study undertaken by Verba and Almond employing cognitive framework of analysis argues that political culture basically emphasises an “attitude towards the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of the self in the system” (Almond and Verba 1963: 7).

One may recall here that even before the publication of the Princeton study by Almond and Verba, cognitive approach in terms of perception towards political systems was adopted by Harold Lasswell in his pioneering work titled *Psychopathology and Politics*, published in 1930. The book basically laid the foundation for studying “personality”, “decision-making processes”, “group interaction” and “perception”; some of these factors play a prominent role in understanding the political culture. Lasswell argues that “democratic state depends upon the technique of discussion … and all whose interests are affected should be consulted in the determination of policy” (Lasswell 1930: 194). In addition to cognitive approach, Clifford Geertz applied the logic of anthropology in the context of bridging the gap between culture and the political processes by stating that the former represents a “symbolic system”. He further argues that culture expresses itself through “ideology”, which provides “symbolic outlet” for “emotional disturbances” generated by “social disequilibrium” (Geertz 1973: 17 and 204). The notion of “social disequilibrium” plays an important role in providing an impetus to the functioning of a political system. If there are heterogeneous social groups with diverse interests, this will have an impact on the capacity of the political system. This is what Samuel Huntington calls “Institutional Decay”. Some of the major elements that bring these social groups together, as Huntington highlights, are “tradition, myth, purpose, or code of behaviour that the persons and groups have in common” (Huntington 1968: 10 and 99). These social elements provide necessary “solidarity” to the social system.

A closer look at some of the theoretical approaches, like cognitive, anthropological, historical and sociological, helps one to understand the complex relationship between politics and society from the correct perspective. One may underline here that some of the metaphoric concepts, like “tradition”, “attitude” and “values”, are playing a crucial role in determining systemic stability. This is more so in such a society in which there are bitter social cleavages. Political elite try to arrive at a consensus-building process to prevent the fissiparous tendencies. This will contribute to what Arend Lijphart calls “Consociational Democracy” (Lijphart 1969: 216–217). The other important variable that constitutes the core of political culture as outlined by Ronald Inglehart is “interpersonal trust”. In addition to trust, which provides necessary bonding to the political system, the level of “tolerance” in a social structure among different social groups will add vitality to democratisation processes (Inglehart 1988).

The unexpected demise of the Soviet Union contributed to the ideological chaos in the post-Soviet space. In addition to these aforementioned features, the notion of
“patrimonialism”, which constitutes the core of pre-Soviet political culture, gained prominence in academic discourses in the space. Alongside “patrimonialism”, the historical elements, geographical location and nature of modernisation processes, as outlined by Inglehart, are some of the other elements that shaped the discourses of political culture in the post-Soviet space’s having its roots in the pre-Tsarist era (Hahn 1991; Fleron Jr. 1996).

One may add here the fact that a cognitive approach to studying political culture is not adequate; rather, applying a complex disciplinary perspective involving historical, anthropological, sociological and institutional perspectives will give the notion of political culture a better understanding in the post-Soviet space (Hall and Taylor 1996).

It has been observed that post-Soviet transition created two types of structures—“social” and “institutional”. One is rooted in historical memories based on “collective consciousnesses”, and the second one is inherited from the Soviet past. Using historical memories as a benchmark to evaluate a political system, William Mishler and Richard Rose are of the opinion that one factor that causes “distrust” in the post-Soviet states is “historical and cultural experiences” (Mishler and Rose 1997: 420 and 437).

Another noteworthy aspect of post-Soviet political processes is the growing role of informal elements in the decision-making processes. Informal elements are getting an upper hand in the institutional structure because of the “trust deficit” and institutional deficit that crept into the political system. This is happening despite the fact that the monolithic Soviet structure existed for about 70 years (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Mishler and Rose 1997: 420 and 437). In the post-Soviet Central Asian states, these customary rules evolved over a period of time and are playing an important role in regulating “social behaviours” and generating “institutional norms” (Collins 2006). They generate enough “trust”, which provides necessary solidarity to their functioning. A closer look at the Tajik Civil War demonstrates how clan elements (part of informal structure) played a role in shaping political processes of this state by bringing various clan units into both “competition” and “cooperation” (Whitefield 2002; Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 727–728; Collins 2006: 282–283).

The Tajik example highlights that the nature of interaction among different sociocultural units in the political arena is shaping the dynamics of democratisation processes. Some of these historical elements have been interacting since ancient times and providing necessary substance to the political system. On the other hand, sociological and institutional practices provide the needed context to the political action and map out the individual’s role in that process as well. The justification of “patrimony” in the context of Central Asia, which operates on the premise of “patron-client relationship”, can be studied in the frameworks, as discussed earlier (Hall and Taylor 1996; Thelen 1999; Pop Eleches 2007). The three previously discussed variables have been aptly reflected in the writings of Barrington Moore Jr. His view is that the success of parliamentary government can be attributed to the fact that it “was a flexible institution which constituted both an arena into which new social elements could be drawn as their demands arose and an institutional mechanism for settling peacefully conflicts of interest among these groups” (Moore Jr. 1966: 21). His approach to political institutions, as discussed here, is relevant in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia because it will help to analyse in what context political institutions evolve, adapt and adjust to new circumstances, keeping the social structure in mind (Pop Eleches 2007).

Looking at the theoretical discourses of the concept of political culture both in the theoretical framework and in empirical practices, what are the inferences one can draw that can be relevant to the present study? Emergence of informal regimes based on “kinship ties”; sense of patrimony rooted in hierarchical relationships, which strengthens trust and mistrust in political institutions by the masses; and a culture of tolerance to political leadership...
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as well as institutions are some of the phenomena shaping the dynamics of political processes in Central Asia. In addition to these features, the structural processes that include the “sedentary and nomadic dynamics”, access to resources and its allocation among the social groups along with a sense of continuity of political leadership in the form of “Khan political culture”, as has been argued by analysts, are shaping the structural and functional notions of political culture (Khazanov 1994; Manz 1994: 5). Though Central Asia as a geographical entity is able to offer a more or less coherent political culture, a microanalysis demonstrates sharp differences in terms of “attitude”, “perception” and the “orientation of general masses towards the political system”. This is reflected in the actual performance of the political system for the last 26 years. It has been observed that Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan offered a different pattern of political transition, while Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan demonstrated a common trajectory (Kunysz 2012).

On the one hand, what is intriguing in the study of political processes in these states is that most of the works assess political processes from an institutional or rational framework; on the other hand, the cultural aspects or the historical experiences hardly get noticed by academics. Thus, to get a balanced perspective of the political system of these states, both of the aspects of democratisation are to be studied. (Collins 2006; Manz 2004; Gleason 1997). While studying the political culture and the nature of “patrimonialism” in Central Asia, three major aspects are to be focussed on. These are geographical location and allocation of resources, the nature of colonial practices and, finally, the reflections of political traditions in the writings of Central Asian intellectuals. These three aspects are broadly shaping the nature of “patrimony” in these states. The “perception” of common masses towards political authority as well as their “orientation” towards the political system are, to a greater extent, also shaped by the three aforementioned factors (Almond and Verba 1963).

Geographical location, control of resources and the evolvement of “patrimonial” political culture

Correlating geography and democracy, Halford J. Mackinder, in his book *Democratic Ideas and Reality*, highlighted that “[Maps are the essential apparatus of the culture”. He further argues that “democracy implies rule by consent of the average citizen, who does not view things from the hill tops, for he must be at his work in his fertile plains” (Mackinder 1919: 27 and 32). Similar argument was given by German geographer Karl Wittfogel. To quote him, “Of all tasks imposed by the natural environment, it was the task imposed by a precarious water situation that stimulated man to develop hydraulic methods of social control”. Only then “did the opportunity arise for despotic pattern of government” (Wittfogel 1957: 12 and 13). Both the works of Mackinder and Wittfogel highlight two important features relevant to the growth of a patrimonial political culture. These are correlation between natural resources and political processes and the consent of the population (Gleason 1997: 5–30) and, second, the evolvement of a centralised political power that facilitated the development of (in the words of Wittfogel) a “managerial state” (Wittfogel 1957: 10–19). Because of the multiple tasks the head of the state performs under a hydraulic system, Wittfogel argues that he (Mirab) tends to be powerful, and there is an asymmetric distribution of political power. Applying the logic of Wittfogel in the context of Central Asia, one can notice that because of the hierarchical distribution of resources like water, one finds the emergence of a patrimonial ruler. Since water is a scarce commodity in Central Asia, the task of allocating it among the community, digging canals, etc. was performed by Mirab (water master) (Wittfogel 1957; Gleason 1997: 5–30). With regard to the election of Mirab, conflicting opinions are
coming out. While George Curzon, in his book *Russia in Central Asia*, mentions that in the Turkmenistan, part *Mirab* was elected annually, the other studies say that he was selected through a competition. The winner of the competition became *Mirab* (Curzon 1889: 115; Wittfoogel 1957; Gleason 1997: 5–30; Geiss 2003: 180). Arminus Vambery, in his interesting travel account titled *Travels in Central Asia*, gives a detailed account of the functioning of the *Mirab*. The Hungarian traveller, in his book, argues that in “each town there is a mirab” who performs multiple roles, including “maintaining law and order” (Vambery 1864: 330–331).

In addition to scarcity of water resources, which contributed to the emergence of a hydraulic leader in Central Asia, the “nomadic and sedentary” character of Central Asian society has also shaped the political culture of this region since ancient times. As Beatrice F. Manz has observed, “The interaction between the two lifestyles and populations—‘nomad and sedentary’, Turkic and Iranian—dominated the history of Central Asia well into the nineteenth century” (Manz 1994: 5). The interface between these two units since ancient times played a prominent role in shaping the social, economic and political processes of this part of the world. Because of complex social life as well as geographical compulsions, what one witnesses is that the nomadic structure evolved to adapt itself to a suit new political environment.

The basis of nomadism, as defined by Anatoly M. Khazanov, is associated with a search for pastureland for cattle as well as closely linked with “movement of population in search of food for himself in which the pastoral groups are involved” (Khazanov 1994: 16). Because of the hazardous geographical conditions, it has been observed that the political structure that emerged in the nomadic society was a complex one and used to be a “centralised one”. The political unit of nomadic society used to perform multiple functions, ranging from allocating pasturlands to nomadic and sedentary groups to mitigating inter- and intra-group conflicts (Khazanov 1994: 151). Using pastoralism as a background, anthropologist Lawrence Krader argues that in the sedentary part of Kazakhstan, the political system is a largely hierarchical one, with Khan stood at the apex followed by *Buiruk* (assistant of the king, combining civil and military functions), landed nobles and common people. The common people used to pay tribute to the *Khan*. Slaves used to be at the lowest position on the hierarchy ladder (Krader 1963: 182). Krader further states that despite movement of population, the nomadic pastoral society achieved a higher level of development in terms of “political solidarity”, “better adaption to the societal need and followed a trajectory of scientific inquiry” (Krader 1955: 102). It is in this context, Krader argues, that “Centralization of political authority is closely related to population concentration in Central Asia, i.e., to net density” (Krader 1963: 323).

In addition to population concentration, the other important factor that played a role in providing legitimacy to the political authority of pastoral nomadic society is the “mythical ancestry”. Geertz is of the opinion that “mythical ancestry” is closely associated with the cultural notion of “primordial trust”, community well-being and kinship ties, which he calls a “symbolic system” (Krader 1971: 182; Geertz 1973:17). Khazanov, in his description of Eurasia, has also highlighted that the notion of “Eternal heavenly”, also known as *Tengri* (in Turkic parlance), provided necessary legitimacy to the rulers, including Genghis Khan and his successors, to rule over the whole of Eurasia. Under the system of *Tengri*, the ruler got an opportunity to interact with the heavenly god (Khazanov 1993: 465–467). In Turkmenistan, the customary rule *Tore* also played a key role in shaping the policymaking processes. The importance of *Tore* can be understood in the context of *Kut*. *Kut* means a geographical zone where rulers can practise these rules. The ancient nomadic Turkmen political culture gave equal importance to all the persons living in the society, and *Khan* played an important role in governing the society and was ably consulted by the *Halq Maslahaty* (House of Elders) (Saray 1989: 52–56).
also be observed in Kyrgyzstan. As stated by Hungarian traveller Vambery, the word Kirgiz, like Qazak, means “nomads” or “wanderer”. Because of nomadic lifestyle, Vambery, quoting the local folklore, states, “Count first the sand in the desert, and then you may number the Kirghis” (Vambery 1864: 368; Krader 1971: 179). Despite their nomadic tradition, the Kyrgyz have developed administrative structure to regulate their social life. In this regard, two informal institutions, namely “Uruk” (sub clan) and “Uruu” (clan), played a prominent role in governing social relations. Intra- as well as inter-family relations based on kin affinity on the basis of “genealogical connection” based on seven generation linkages are the primary basis for formation of “Uruk” and “Uruu” (Sahin 2013: 39–49). Folk oral traditions, customary rules and regulations and the most important sources for governance in the traditional Kyrgyz society was Manas, i.e., the Kyrgyz oral epic. A closer study of Manas demonstrates that some of the principles enshrined in the epic, like “customary tradition”, “moral values” and “kinship tradition”, provided the necessary substance to the nomadic political culture (Sahin 2013: 39–49).

Looking at the nomadic traditions of Kazakh, Turkmen and Kyrgyz, two important inferences can be drawn relevant to the present study of political culture. These are, first, that informal social relations played an important role in shaping the political discourses of these states and, second, that in this nomadic society, the basis of group identity is being provided by “kinship ties” (Schatz 2004: 12–16). The kinship relationship in these societies is shaped by clan relations. These clan relations are also not homogeneous in nature. As Krader mentions, Greater Horde has two divisions, namely “Western” and “Eastern” along with “Middle Horde” and “Younger Horde”. Similarly, he mentions that the Kyrgyz tribe is known by different names, namely Kara-Kirgiz or Black Kirgiz. Often, the term Burut is also used for them. Krader further highlights that the word Kyrgyz derived from “Turkic word 40 Kyrk, and daughter, Kyz” (Krader 1963: 179–180; Olcott 2010: 183). Anthropological works done by Krader demonstrates that the Kyrgyz tribe basically divide them into two categories, i.e., “on” (“right division”) and “sol” (“left division”) (Krader 1963: 200). The Turkmen nomadic groups are also divided into five broad categories, and prominent among these are subgroups like “Yomut, Teke, Choudirs, Teke, and Sariks” having distinct genealogical lineages. These divisions and subdivisions of clan reinforce the formation of an informal hierarchical structure, which, in turn, strengthens the “logic of patrimony” (Rossabi 1994: 9, 22, 31–34; Edgar 2004: 21; Schatz 2004: 98).

In addition to the unique nomadic-pastoral community system that evolved its own political system, the sedentary part of Central Asia has developed administrative mechanisms largely guided by religious principles, i.e., Sharia. The annexations of Central Asia by the Mongols have also brought it out under a hierarchical administrative system. One may add here that one commonality that one witnesses in both the administrative systems (nomadic and sedentary) is that it is quite hierarchical in nature. Second, the most important element of Mongol administrative system is the unqualified loyalty to the Mongol Khan by the clan groups (Vambery 1864: 364–365; Lindholm 1986: 36–43; Rossabi 1994: 9, 22, 31–32). The influence of the Mongol system of administration was evident in the sedentary part of Central Asia, namely Khanate of Bukhara, Kokand and Khiva. For instance, Vambery mentions that the Constitution of Khiva followed the Mongol system, with Khan being chosen by the community, followed by four Inag (close advisors of Khan), Nakib (the spiritual head), Bi (the military aid), and eight other categories of administration. Vambery further mentions that the practice of allocating land and offering tributes was considered as part of the administrative system (Vambery 1864: 364–365). One can notice that hierarchical forms of administration in Bukhara are the same as in Khiva. As highlighted by Joshua Kutniz, Bek used to be the
highest spiritual and temporal authority. Like Khiva, the Bukharan administrative system was divided into three administrative units, namely provinces, counties and villages. The three corresponding administrative heads, as highlighted by Kutniz, were “Bek, Amliakadar and Aksakal”. The administrative system was basically focussed on revenue collection, and this practise more or less strengthened the patron-client relationship in the Bukharan administrative structure (Kunitz 1964: 12–13). In Kokand (until its incorporation into the Tsarist Empire), a pattern of administrative structure emerged that was more or less similar to the Khivan and Bukharan administrative system. It was headed by Khan at the apex of the administration (Zenkovsky 1955: 15; Ashrafyan 1999: 26–27; Tabyshalieva 2005: 82).

One interesting aspect of the sedentary as well as the nomadic pattern of administration is the existence of Aksaqal (person with a white beard or an elder person). The Aksaqal is (elder person of a community) located in a particular geographical space often known as Mahalla. The same is also known as “gaps”, “guzar” and “Chaikhona” in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Uzbekistan, respectively (Geiss 2001: 98–99; Dadabaev 2013: 183–184). The Aksaqal is chosen by the community and respected by local population because of their wisdom, neutrality and ability to transmit genealogical history to the local community. Because of his experience, he used to play a key role in determining the movements of cattle and herds in search of pastureland. In the sedentary part of Central Asia, they act as a custodian of arbitration processes at the local level (Geiss 2001: 98–99; Dadabaev 2013: 183–184). In the sedentary part of Tajikistan, the Aksaqal is assisted by Poikors (assistant) in decision-making processes. The Aksaqal used to be guided by the local adats as well as sharia principles. The basic purposes of these institutions were to generate a sense of community bonding as well as to adjudicate local issues. One may recall here that the institutions of Aksaqal is still functioning and getting support from the Central Asian states, more particularly in Uzbekistan (Geiss 2001: 98–99; Dadabaev 2013: 183–184).

A closer look at the traditional political processes of Central Asia – like the dichotomy between “sedentary” and “nomadic”, “adat” and “shariat”, pastoral community, movement of nomadic social group, respect to the Khan and Aksaqal, and community trust – demonstrates that societal structure used to be the bedrock of the political system. The discourses of Comparative Politics over the years as highlighted earlier are also focussing on some of these aspects to determine political stability, political change and political development. It may be highlighted that in addition to the dichotomy between “nomadic and sedentary population”, which shapes the structural aspect of political culture of Central Asia, the colonial administrative system provided the necessary substances as well as continuity to the patrimonial political culture (Martin 2002; Geiss 2001: 98–99; Massell 1968: 180–183).

Colonial administrative system and nature of political culture in Central Asia

As has been discussed, the annexation and accession of Central Asia by colonial rulers, more particularly the Tsarist rulers, brought out fundamental changes in the administrative structure, both in the nomadic and sedentary regions. The colonization processes not only created new administrative norms but also adapted existing sociopolitical system to new political institutionalisation processes. In the nomadic parts of Central Asia, the Russian colonial administrators, in order to ensure their preponderance, brought out numerous legislations to control pasturelands. Similar measures were undertaken in the sedentary parts of Central Asia (Martin 2002).

Leslie Dienes argues that with the annexation of the nomadic parts of Central Asia, the socioeconomic fabrics of this region underwent a massive change. Dienes posits that the
settlement of the Slavic population created a scarcity of land, as a result of which resentment grew against the settled population. Subsequently, the colonial administration also imposed taxation on the nomadic population. This contributed to the emergence of new types of social groups within the nomadic population (Dienes 1975: 350–355). The 1868 Provisional Statute for the Administration of the Steppe became the basis for regulating the affairs of nomadic steppe region after the dissolution of the horde system of administration in 1822. In addition to this statute, the colonial administration issued a series of decrees aimed at regulating land deeds (Dines 1975: 350–355; Martin 2002: 66–68; Temirkoulov 2004: 94). Acts like the 1889 Resettlement Act and the 1891 Statute for the Administration of the Steppe contributed to the establishment of a Resettlement Administrative Commission in 1896. The 1891 act contributed to the evolution of a new law under which all the lands were completely nationalised. Some of these provisions transformed the nomadic steppe region to a considerable extent and facilitated their integration with sedentary Central Asia (Martin 2002: 73–74; d’Encausse 1989).

Through administrative restructuring, Russian administration not only ensured a transformation of the nomadic parts of Central Asia but also did the same in the sedentary region. The Tsarist rulers introduced a hierarchical administrative system with military governor at the top. The military governor used to report to the Tsarist authority and perform both civil and political functions. The lowest unit of administration in Central Asia during Tsarist period was headed by Aksaqal in every villages known as Qisalks. Several villages constitute one Volost. The Volost administration consists of representatives elected by local population and at the same time members nominated by the Governor-General. Uezd (district) was the third at the hierarchy. The head of the district administration was appointed by the Governor-General1 (d’Encausse 1989: 155–156; Abdurakhimova 2002: 244).

The Russian colonial administrators, to appease the local sensitivity, allowed the practice of shariyat interpretation in deciding the legal matters, which were being headed by a local Kazi. The Kazi was elected by the local population every three years. However, it has to be certified by the colonial administration. This was done to ensure order in the colonial administered regions so also to provide sanctity to the Russian colonisation among the masses. While deciding cases, the Kazi used to take local customs and traditions in adjudicating cases. However, they used to decide civil and criminal cases of minor significance. These courts have no jurisdiction over non-native populations. Criminal cases and matters relating to the Russians were mostly decided by Tsarist court consisting of Russian judges. In the nomadic parts of Kyrgyzstan, the judge used to hold a title called bi (Zenkovsky 1955: 18–19; Sartori 2011: 295–296 and 301).

From the forelonged discussions, what are the inferences one can draw relevant to the notion of political culture in Central Asia? On the one hand, the Tsarist colonial rulers’ objective in governing Central Asia is not aimed at creating a participative political culture; on the other hand, Moscow was interested in creating a colonial structure of administration that ensured uninterrupted dominance of Russia over this geopolitical space. The hierarchical administrative structure that they created perpetuated the dominance of colonial administration giving little opportunity to the masses in participating it. Instead of Khan, a new patrimonial ruler came up in the form of military governor whose function was to strengthen the edifice of Russian colonial administration (Mackenzie 1967). This form of administrative practices strengthened the patron-client relationship and also legitimised the rule of traditional political elite like Kazi at the lower level of judiciary as well as of the Aksaqal. Like other colonial powers, the Tsarist colonial rulers also found it convenient to use the traditional institutions rather than creating a new one that will penetrate easily with the
social structure and generate “trust” that Inglehart talks about, as discussed earlier, towards the colonial administration (Dines 1975: 352–353).

One may underline here that the patrimony, which is the essence of Central Asian political culture, is not only reflected in the folk traditions and colonial practices but also inferred from the local narratives and literary writings. This is also a reflection of “collective consciousness” processes that constitute the essence of political culture.

**Oral narratives, literary traditions and the community culture in the context of Central Asian tradition**

The Central Asian political culture was not only reflected through the sedentary and nomadic political processes but also in the oral narratives, literary writings and community cultural practices. In the Central Asian political tradition, a number of myths emerged through which political elite even in recent years justify their patrimonial rule. Different forms of oral traditions and literary practices emerged in Central Asia, which highlight the relationship between political institutions, questions of allotment of land and societal practices. One may add here that these correlations provide the necessary substance to the social practices as well as political traditions. Literatures published in Central Asia through the ages, like “Dastans, ghazels, fairy tales”, etc., emphasised the charismatic leadership, in which the Khan is viewed as “representative of god on earth”. The nomadic traditions also reinforced such kind of perception towards leadership. The perception of common people towards political leadership is that of a father figure who can protect them from external enemies and address their grievances in a just manner (Abazov 2007: 84–85; Bouma 2011: 564–567).

In Turkmenistan, the legend of Oguz Khan is well known. The oral tradition says that the sky god (Menge Kok Tengri) gave all the land to Oguz Khan who divided all the land to his 6 sons and 24 grandsons. Turkmen myth considers him as the father figure of Turkmenistan as he traces his genealogy to Prophet Noah a highly revered figure in Turkmenistan. Local myth says that the 24 grandchildren of Oguz Khan later on formed 24 clans, which one can find in modern-day Turkmenistan (Agajanov 1999; Glen 1999: 60; Dolive 2014: 86–87; Darling 2016: 86–87; Golden 2016: 150–155). Persian writer Rashid al Din, who lived in the 14th century, mentions that there was a bitter fight between Oguz Khan and his father. Oguz Khan took control over his father’s territory and extended it to all over Turkmenistan (Agajanov 1999: 61–62). The Turkmen mythical narratives basically revolve around heroic leadership, mythical figures, Sufi saints, annexation of land, etc. (Bouma 2011: 571).

The nomadic traditions of Kazakhstan also provide a rich history of cult figures, mystic men, strong rulers and the same found expression through folk tales, oral traditions and literary activities. Like Oguz Khan, the mythical figure who provides a rallying point for Kazakh politics is Chengiz Khan. In the Kazakh literary narratives, Chengiz Khan is being portrayed as a benevolent leader with a mythical legacy, who provided unity to the Kazakh people. In addition to the Chengiz Khan, who became the rallying point for the Kazakh national figure, Kenessary Kasymuly is also getting much attention. After Chengiz Khan, Kasymuly was widely recognised as the person who undertook measures to improve the administrative structure of Kazakhstan, especially the Middle Horde, which he represented. He synchronised the nomadic customs with Islamic sharia law. The Tsarist imperial ruler, after a prolonged negotiation, brought him under their control. The Kazakh batyr Raiymbek Batyr Tuke Ully, who was born in Almaty and fought valiantly against the Chinese by joining hands with Russia, is also becoming a popular figure in Kazakhstan (Fergus 2003: 128; Kassymova, Kundakbaeva and Ustin, 2012: 221; Kussainova and Abdigapbarova 2016).
The Alash movement, which gained wider popularity in the beginning of the 20th century and also advocated greater sedentarization, separation of religion from politics, uniqueness of Kazakh national identity, etc., is also getting much attention in recent years as a reflection of community culture (Kendirbaeva 1999: 33).

Kazakh ethnographer of 19th century Chokan Valikhanov, in his book *dikokamennye Kirgiz* (wild mountain Kyrgyz), gives a description about Kyrgyz society. Valikhanov explains that the Kyrgyz society has been divided between *Manap* (“father of the family” having right to rule) and *Kara Bukary* (ordinary masses). He terms that kinship practices based on “lineage” and customs are quintessence of Kyrgyz society (Gullette 2010: 66). The Kyrgyz folk tale, i.e., *Manas*, as discussed earlier is the most authoritative representation of Kyrgyz society’s appreciation for valour, courage and charismatic personality, (Reichl 2016). As described in the oral epic, *Manas* is a legendary and mystical figure born to an old couple named Jaqup and Chyriry. Following the oriental traditions, many saints predicted a bright future for *Manas*. He not only protected Kyrgyz people from external aggression but also gave a cohesive identity to them. The folk tale also narrates about how treacherously he got killed (Reichl 2016: 330). In addition to *Manas*, two other novels, namely Valikhanov’s *Smert’ Kukotay-khana i*, published in 1861 and V.V. Radlov’s *Bok Murum*, published a year later, dealt with heroic tales associated with the Kyrgyz literary works. Both the tales talk about heroic deeds of rulers in the Kyrgyz society, their succession, the community feast, etc. (Hatto 1969: 344–346).

Mysticism, myth and heroic tales are the most important sources to understand political traditions of Uzbekistan as well as Tajikistan. One may add here that both these states came under the category of sedentary parts of Central Asia. It has been argued that the Tamerlane considered being the greatest ruler of Uzbekistan. He interpreted the notion of “sovereignty” to the extension of power over different territories. He further argued that one of the key functions of sovereign state is the conduct of “external affairs” (Allworth 1990: 24). The contribution of Uzbek scholar and philosopher Ibn Sina is also quite noteworthy. Like Plato, he believes that an “ideal ruler is the prophet” and possesses all the “virtues”. Since he possesses all the “virtues”, he “may be worshipped after Prophet”. One may add here that Ibn Sina’s view can be more or less correlated with the divine origin theory of state that gained popularity in medieval Europe (Rosenthal 1958: 156). Another Uzbek scholar of the late 19th and early 20th century, Abdulhamid Sulayman Choplon, in an interesting novel *Kecha va Kunduz* (Night and Day), brought out the notion of colonialism and political process. One of the principle characters of this novel, *Miryoqub*, continuing the tradition of Ibn Sina, advocated that “We the Sart…population, believe first in god and then the Tsar” (Lyons 2001: 176). Similarly, the Persian literary figure Abolqasem Ferdowski who has a great follower in Tajikistan, in his classic work *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, gives a narrative about formation of statehood, the dichotomy between good and evil, etc. The book also delves into mythical and mystical rulers (Abazov 2007: 86–87). In addition to the *Manas*, the best Central Asian exposition to the concept of ideal ruler can be inferred from the work of al-Farabi. Al Farabi lists out four ideal forms of government: namely, an ideal king who rules by his own will; the second category is one in which a “ruler is guided by a team known as” (“al-ru’asd’ al-akyd wa-dawa’ l-fa’d’il”); the third form of government is based on what al-Farabicalls “king according to the law” (“malik al-suma’”); and the final form is that a “single person may act in different groups” (“ru’asd’ al-suma’”). This categorisation of four rulers is more or less similar to the Aristotelian classification of government (Crone 2003: 208).

Three important inferences one can draw here from the aforementioned discussion are relevant to the study of political culture of Central Asia. These are, first, acceptance of a political leader who got legitimacy to rule through his assertive personality and is more or
less akin to the god; second, political leadership is considered as benevolent because the ruler will protect the local folk both from external aggression and from internal conflict, thus giving order to the social structure; finally, after going through some of the Central Asian folk tales and narratives, one can get a sense that succession is largely premised upon kin relations based on what anthropologists call “community tradition”. Thus, the perception of masses with regard to the political system is rooted in a benevolent leader who can be considered as patriarch in the community. Some of these factors contributed to the evolution of a personality cult in the political arena, which justifies patrimony in recent years (Abazov 2007: 86–89; Isaacs 2015). One interesting question that may arise is that how far the political culture and traditions of Central Asia is quite relevant in the present context? In the post-Soviet phase, what one witnesses in the Central Asian political system is that political elite of all the five states of Central Asia (late Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, late Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan and then President Askar Akayev) justified their rule in the name of tradition. Even the longest serving presidents of Central Asia, Noor Sultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, Imomali Rahmon of Tajikistan and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow of Turkmenistan, on a number of occasions stated their continuance of power in the name of tradition and political culture (Isaacs 2015). However, it has to be underlined here that though there is a sense of continuity in the political system, what is missing is the context for operationalisation. This requires a new “logic” to justify patrimonialism in these states.

Conclusion

Going through both the theoretical polemics and empirical practices of political culture in the Central Asian political tradition, one can draw seven inferences relevant to understanding present-day Central Asian politics. First, the theoretical literature underline the importance of cognitive processes like “perception”, “attitude” and “collective consciousness” in the operationalisation of the political system. Second, it highlights the role of “community trust” and “community solidarity” in sustaining the political processes. Third, “myths”, “genealogical linkages”, “tolerance” and “customary rules”, though considered to be part of “informalism”, play a role in influencing the political processes. Fourth, geographical factors along with “allocation resources” shape the political processes. Fifth, the present study demonstrates that the institutionalisation of the political system is a continuous process. Sixth, local narratives, folk traditions and collective imaginations as reflected in the oral and written literatures help in gauging the vibrancy of a political system. Finally, these inferences, as discussed earlier, constitute the essence of political culture and traditions of Central Asia. One factor contributing to the emergence of a strong ruler is that masses are reposing faith on them and there is a continuity of the tradition. The growth of Mirab and Khan political culture is a good example of this. The Tsarist rulers also did not want to change the political culture and tradition of this part of the world, fearing breakdown of the colonial administration. Rather, they provided necessary legitimacy to both the nomadic and sedentary political institutions to penetrate effectively in the colonial administrative structure. One issue that needs to be highlighted here is that though the Central Asian political system resembles a “patrimonial” one, it still can witness election at the local level (as in the case of Mirab) in the pre-Tsarist era. Thus, one can say that despite many limitations, the Central Asian political culture has many progressive elements, which requires an in-depth study in the context of modern democratic polity. At a broader level, the essence of Central Asian political culture should be studied in the overall sociocultural traditions of Asia.
Political culture and traditions

Notes

1 As has been argued by Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, informalism implies a process in which “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels” (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 727).
2 See also Mohapatra, 2006: 180–184.
3 See also Mohapatra, 2006: 32–38.

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