

**DANA SULEIMEN**  
(Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland)

**The Tradition of *at tergeý*  
– Tabooing the Names of a Woman’s Husband  
and His Male Relatives in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Kazakhstan**

**Abstract**

This paper discusses the question of how the old Kazakh custom of the ban on uttering the name of a husband and his male relatives by his wife is still observed in modern Kazakhstan. To do this, material from five main regions of Kazakhstan (North, South, Central, East and West) was collected and analysed. The study aims to do a sociolinguistic analysis of the result of the questionnaire. Although this old tradition is well known and described a long time ago by such researchers as Nikolaj Ilminskii, Nikolaj Grodekov, Ybyraı Altynsarın, Grigorij Potanin, Aleksandr Samoilovich and others, no modern fieldwork was done to check whether this tradition is still alive and how it changes. As is known, present-day Kazakhstan had changed significantly since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Ilminskii first studied the Kazakh language and traditions, Wilhelm Radloff and the researchers mentioned earlier, who were linguists and explorers. However, many cultures are still observed. As Grodekov noted, the avoiding of the pronunciation of a husband’s name and his male relatives by his wife is familiar to the Kazakhs and Kirghiz. Somoilovich, basing on Mustafa Shoqai’s materials, devoted a paper to this question. Perhaps the best story was related by Altynsarın, who has registered an anecdote how a woman who went to bring water and saw a wolf killing an ewe rushed back to her house and shouted for help, transforming the words ‘*lake*’, ‘*reed*’, ‘*wolf*’, ‘*sheep*’ and ‘*knife*’, since her husband and his male relatives bore names composed of these words.

**Keywords:** *at tergeý*, tabooing, male names, modern Kazakhstan, gender linguistics

## Introduction

A Kazakh married woman has never called her in-laws by name because it was tabooed for her. From the very first day of staying at her husband’s home, she had to invent suitable substitute names for her in-laws, as they had to correspond to a person. *At tergeý* is a kind of mutual respect and reverence between a bride and her husband’s relatives.

There are a few stories relating to an old Kazakh custom of the ban on uttering the name of a husband and his male relatives by the Kazakh women. The most interesting example was related by Altynsarin, who has registered an anecdote how a woman who went to bring water and saw a wolf killing an ewe rushed back to her house and shouted for help, transforming the words *bulaq* ‘lake’, *qamys* ‘reed’, *qasqyr* ‘wolf’, *qoi* ‘sheep’ and *pyshaq* ‘knife’, since her husband and his male relatives bore names composed of these words: *Qoilybai*, *Qasqyrbai*, *Qamysbai*, *Bulaqbai*, and *Pyshaqbai*. *Qairaqbai*.<sup>1</sup> The names in the story were popular in traditional Kazakh culture. For example, the component *bai* ‘rich, wealthy man’ is used only for men and the component *gül* ‘flower’ only for women. In the above story, we can see five male names derived in this way: *Bulaqbai* ‘spring + rich’, *Qamysbai* ‘reed + rich’, *Qasqyrbai* ‘wolf + rich’, *Qoilybai* ‘sheep -II + rich’ and *Pyshaqbai* ‘knife + rich’.

### The historical research review of tradition *at tergeý*

In general, the custom *at tergeý* by the Kazakh brides identifies the word of the bride, the culture of speech. If an investigated name is used instead of a name, it is equivalent to the mockery of the same person. A bride learns names of her husband’s relatives in wedding party by *Betashar* – the ceremony of opening bride’s face by a special written song where all groom’s relatives are presented to bride.<sup>2</sup> After *Betashar* bride does not call her husband’s relatives by name.

*At tergeý* is one of the criteria that examine the eloquence, cheerfulness and courtesy of Kazakh women. Some mistresses, however, find that many mistakes do not err in the wrong way. That is why *at tergeý* is not only the name of famous person but also the fullness of the name of all the people of the same family, the past of the whole family, the preservation of noble morals and beautiful manners. *At tergeý* is a strict criterion for criticism of indefinite, homogeneous, inexhaustible, fluent speech of Kazakhs. This is why the same bridegroom is in the same family, in the village, in the same tribe, and public authority. *At tergeý* is a tradition, not only observed by the Kazakh women, but also by the Kazakh men.

<sup>1</sup> Altynsarin 1870, pp. 122–136.

<sup>2</sup> Köse 2000, p. 51.

The Kazakh brides did not just name relatives, but also investigated the name of their husbands. For example, when a family member calls a child's father (sometimes called a foster-child), some women are studying whether he is at home: *otağasy* 'the head of the family', *ákeleriń* 'your father', etc.

Such a tradition, first of all, shows that marriages are respectful, and secondly, it is well-deserved respect for generations. It may reflect the mastery, nobility, deep love of the Kazakh women, their generosity, morals, and responsibility for their offspring.

This old tradition is well known and has been described a long ago by researchers. For example, Ilminskii mentioned that calling husband's relatives by name is forbidden for women: "Сноха не должна называть по имени родственников мужа. Братьям и сестрам мужа она дает свои имена: торем, шырак, жаркын, шырайлым, бикеш. Если кто-нибудь из мужей родни называется именем какой-нибудь вещи, то сноха эту вещь не должна назвать обычным ее именем а выдумывает для нее другое слово, производя от глагола так, что это всем понятно".<sup>3</sup>

As Grodekov noted, avoiding the pronunciation of a husband's name and his male relatives by her wife is common to the Kazakhs and Kirghiz: "Хорошая жена, даже в бытность невестью, из стыдливости, не должна звать по имени мужчину родню, (кайн) и все колно его, до того круга родства, в котором браке разришаются, а должна звать их нарицательными именами".<sup>4</sup>

Samoilovich, basing on Mustafa Shoqai's materials, devoted a paper to the words a woman is forbidden to utter. "Семья Чокаевых принадлежит к племени «кыпшак», роду «тору-айгыр» или просто «тору», подроду «шашты», кольну «бошай», полкольну «жанай»(про-про-продедь Мустафа Чокаева). Предали внутри которых для родичей М.Чокаева запретны в ностоящее время взимные браки, ограничиваются принадлежностью к подроду «шашты»".<sup>5</sup> Mustafa Shoqai gave examples by his tribe 'shashty'. Somoilovich classified in these ways:

- (1) Lexicons of words spoken between a woman and her husband;
- (2) Lexicons of words spoken between a woman and her children;
- (3) Lexicons of words spoken between a woman and her husband's relatives.

According to the Samoilovich Kazakh women used collective nouns or particular words, which refer to a well-established system when interpreting the names of the people who were banned.

In linguistics, we call this tradition *tabuy sózder* 'taboo words, forbidden words'. Ahmetov compares studies on taboo words in Turkic languages.<sup>6</sup> He concludes that these words come from beliefs in the mystery world. He stresses that people did not call the things by name because of fear.

According to Januzaqov, "Personal names were replaced by simple ones, according to a specific system. Men older than the husband of a woman was called *qayın ağa*. Under

<sup>3</sup> Ilminskii 1861, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> Grodekov 1889, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Somoilovich 1915, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmetov 1995, p. 81.

the ban, the personal name of an individual person was used in a distorted form, for example, instead of *Ali – Sali*, *Tursyn – Mursyn*. For a married woman were forbidden and nominal names”.<sup>7</sup>

Women called their husband as ‘father of *Baimyrza*’ by the name of her son and also as “head of home”, “our one”, “that one”. This tradition has different methods. Sometimes a woman called by person’s shape of a face or body like *bayýrsak*, *domalaq* etc. Occasionally, if the names of banned names were unable to investigate, the names of the names would have to be changed. Instead of *Ali*, mentioned above, *Sali* replaced *Mursyn* with *Tursyn*, instead of *Sambet*, *Ahmet-Sahmet* and *Jaqyp* as *Maqyp*.

In tradition, women are using skilful words. This elects the full range of women’s thoughts and the level of their language. The tradition *at tergeý* has a pearl of perfect wisdom, the sharpness of view, and insistence on the notorious word of mouth. Commenting on the phenomenon of euphemism and discovery as a historical semantic approach in the formation of vocabulary, commentator A. Hasenov points out that regarding specific anthroponyms:

“The village’s big name is *Bad – Soqpaq zhol*, *Sattibai – Jelindi úýyz*, *Bukabai – Súzerbai*, *Qarabas – Boran sheke*, *Sarybas – Shikil sheke*, *Sary – Shiqyl*, *Beisembi – Kún juma attas* and so on”.<sup>8</sup>

### The tradition *at tergeý* in modern Kazakhstan

Nowadays, this tradition is still living. I have conducted a questionnaire in Kazakhstan to analyse in which regions the tradition is observed by people.<sup>9</sup> In the questionnaire women and men from five regions of Kazakhstan were asked. Most of them were from Almaty (West-South Kazakhstan). On the questionnaire, 50 people answered: 25 men, 25 women. Almaty is a big city, that’s why people live here from other parts of Kazakhstan. The local people keep on observing the tradition, especially in the rural area and in the suburbs.

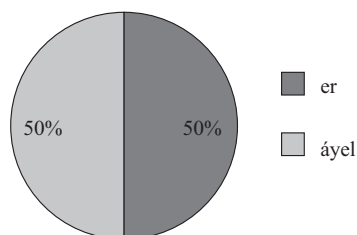


Diagram 1. Gender of participants

<sup>7</sup> Januzaqov 1960, pp. 79–84.

<sup>8</sup> Hasenov 1985, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the questionnaire visit <https://goo.gl/forms/cWSw8khhXZZJURh02>.

As we see in Diagram 1, men and women answered equally. However, men mentioned that they call their wife's relatives by name, except their fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law. Also, in the questionnaire, only the young generation answered. That's why we cannot say that the younger generation does not respect the elders. Below we have shown an age difference of answerers. (Diagram 2.)

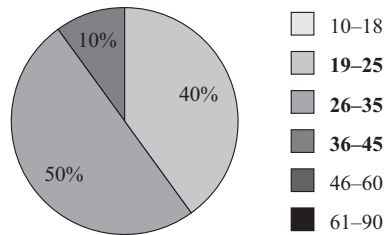


Diagram 2. Age differences of participants

By the history of the country, we can say that in North Kazakhstan the people do not keep the traditions as firmly as in South Kazakhstan. During the Soviet Union, this part of Kazakhstan was destroyed by the Russian Empire. After the independence of the country, all things (culture, religion, etc.) are getting better than ever was before. Most of the answerers wrote that they call their husband's relatives by name. They said that it is not forbidden for them. In the diagram below (Diagram 3.), we can see that in the South (Qyzylorda, Shymkent, Taraz), Almaty, East (Aqtóbe) and West Kazakhstan the tradition *at tergeý* is retained very well. Especially in South Kazakhstan for women are forbidden to call by naming their husband's relatives.

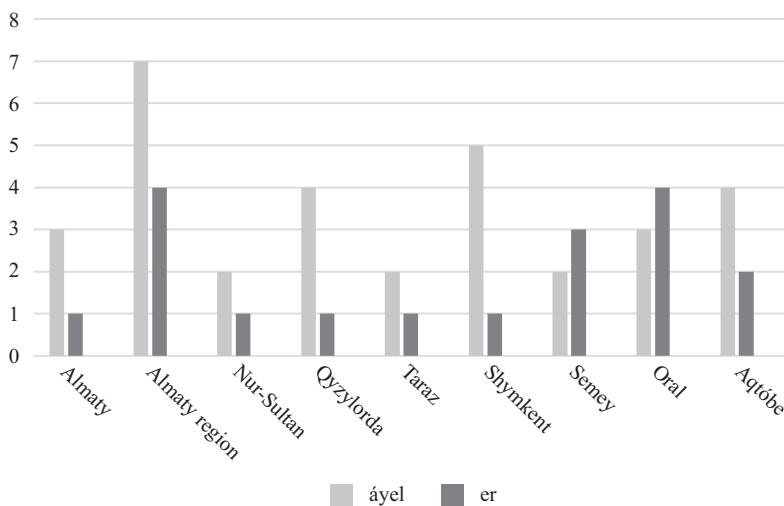


Diagram 3. Cities of respondents

From the answers we can formulate some patterns of using the tradition *at tergeý*:

- ‘name + brother, sister, aunt, uncle’: *Quralai qayyn bike, Arman aǵa*, etc.
- ‘nicknames’: If a person’s name *Pyshaqbat*, the woman will not say word *knife*;
- ‘nicknames by the shape of the human body: If a person is quite fat, the woman will call *Bayýrsaq* (a kind of dish fried in oil), etc.
- ‘name or mother, father (in Russian)’: *Arman, Daniyar* or *mama, papa*.

Everyone wrote the importance of the tradition that it is necessary to keep respect for adults between each other and giving the best examples for children how to show respect before adults. Also, we can meet people who do not call their relatives by name in transport, school, university, hospital, party, etc.

Generally, names of family members are common to all regions of Kazakhstan. We can see this by examples which are given below:

- (1) *qayyn ata*  
‘father-in-law’
- (2) *qayyn apa / ene*  
‘mother-in-law’
- (3) *qayyn aǵa*  
husband or wife’s elder brother  
‘brother-in-law’
- (4) *qayyn ápke / bike*  
wife’s elder sister, ‘sister-in-law’
- (5) *qayyn, qayyn ini*  
husband’s younger brother  
‘brother-in-law’
- (6) *qayyn sińili*  
husband’s or wife’s sister  
‘sister-in-law’
- (7) *abysyn*  
wife of the elder brother concerning the wife of a younger brother,  
‘sister-in-law’.

Calling the names of sister-in-law and brother-in-law, who is younger than the bride, is different. In some regions (especially, North Kazakhstan) the bride call husband and his relatives without using any individual names. But in the other areas recording to the questionnaire is entirely cultural. Some of the unique names are used for girls (Ex. (8), (11), (12)) and boys (Ex. (9), (10), (13)). For example,

- (8) *kekildim*  
quiffed – pass.1sing.  
‘my quiffed one’

- (9) *erke bala*  
spoilt child  
'darling'
- (10) *myrza bala*  
generous child  
'gentleman'
- (11) *erkem*  
spoilt – pass.1sing.  
'my darling'
- (12) *aqyldym*  
clever – poss.1sing.  
'my clever one'
- (13) *kenje bala*  
'youngest child'

My mother was born in China, and she is an ethnic Kazakh. As I remember, she does not call my father's relatives by name. In administrative places, when people ask full name and surname of father, she does not call my grandfather's name, she just shows an ID card. The name of my grandfather's grandfather – *Tuman*, she calls *shai'yt* 'fog'. She calls my uncle by nickname *Erkem* 'darling' and my aunt *Abysh* 'short nickname like John – Jo' instead of *Abai*. She told that when she moved to Almaty (South-East Kazakhstan), she heard from her relatives who are local people in Kazakhstan that they call by the names their father-in-law as *papa* and brothers-in-law by name. She was shocked as she never behaved like that. In 1997, the situation in Kazakhstan was still changeable, so people used to speak in Russian and it does not change so prominent as in the Soviet Union. Especially in big cities like Almaty. In villages, the situation was quite better than in big cities.

## Conclusions

There were two significant examinations for the young Kazakh woman, who becomes the bride. One of them is to understand and adhere to the rules, principles, and ways of the same country, of the same family, and even to the smallest of them, and to give them complete insight into the names of the elders, is an investigation of his name. If a new young woman comes to call by the name of the older adults, she will be subjected to severe criticism, blindness, incompetence, disrespect, and reprimand. The young brides should not call by the name their eldest relatives and old elders in the same village, but they can call by the names of their younger sisters.

Here are the high ethics for Kazakh brides. First of all, the mother-in-law of the young bride is directly related to the *at tergey*. At the place where her husband was born, her mother-in-law also passes from this examination by elders, and she knows the best

way to rename male relatives and elders in that place. The perpetrator’s name, first of all, proceeds in the same name as the elders who came to that country, and on the other hand, it requires the witty and laziness of the bride to investigate the names of those whom she did not name.

As we know, the aim of tradition does not change. It keeps a meaning like it was in earlier centuries. Nowadays, some of the couples who have married by Islamic law *Sharia*, they keep this tradition better than other couples. Also, it is well-known in youth who educated in the family, which follows this kind of tradition very well and speak among themselves in Kazakh. Diagrams show that in the South part of Kazakhstan the tradition *at tergeý* is better-known than in other regions.

Also, in mass media, this topic is written many times. “How to keep our tradition *at tergeý*?” “Is it important in modern Kazakhstan?” etc. We can say that this tradition is an interesting topic not only in ethnography, but also in social linguistics, journalism, and theology.

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