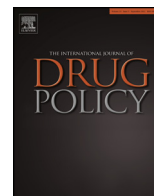




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Research paper

Hashish as cash in a post-Soviet Kyrgyz village

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ABSTRACT

Background: This paper discusses how hashish produced by the local population of Tyup, Kyrgyzstan became an important source of cash in an agricultural semi-subsistence economy. The local population of the region became involved in hashish production due to a cash deficit in both the agricultural economy and wider society from the beginning of the 1990s. Privatization of land as a consequence of the neoliberalization of the economy left many families with small share of lands which are insufficient to provide market surplus. Agricultural products, therefore, are mainly consumed by the majority of farmers, turning the economy of the region into a semi-subsistence agricultural economy. In the context of such a cash deficit economy, wild-growing cannabis plants are used not only as a cash crop but are symbolically turned into a form of cash and a source of informal credit.

Methods: The paper is based on a research study conducted between 2009 and 2010 that adopted a mixed-method approach to data collection. I gathered 64 semi-structured interviews, 147 structured interviews and made ethnographic observations of the livelihoods of the people of Toolu village in Tyup region.

Results: The local population of the region became involved in hashish production due to a cash deficit in both the agricultural economy and wider society from the beginning of the 1990s. Privatization of land as a consequence of the neoliberalization of the economy left many families with small share lands which are insufficient to provide market surplus. Agricultural products, therefore, are mainly consumed by the majority of farmers, turning the economy of the region into a semi-subsistence agricultural economy. In the context of such a cash deficit economy, wild-growing cannabis plants are used not only as a cash crop but are symbolically turned into a form of cash and a source of informal credit. People can pay for goods with hashish as well as obtain advance payments and credits for it. I argue that hashish making assists the agricultural rural economy by allowing people to obtain goods, advance payments and credits to use for the cultivation of land, their everyday needs and maintaining social relationships. I also argue that many local farmers, who do not consider themselves as criminals, were able to become involved in this activity by shifting the meaning of hashish and hashish making from an illegal activity to a culturally valued and justifiable form of economic activity.

Conclusion: This allows me to show that the local drug economy in Tyup serves as a lens through which to examine the strategies through which illegal and illicit drug production becomes culturally acceptable. Understanding of hashish production in this local context of the semi-subsistence agricultural economy operating in a constant deficit of cash provides rich data for effective evidence-based policy.

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Introduction

This paper presents the case of hashish production in the Tyup region of Issyk-Kul oblast in Kyrgyzstan. Based on a mixed method study, I present the context of an agricultural semi-subsistence economy that leaves many farmers in need of extra income-generating activities. Although considered as an immoral activity during the Soviet-era, hashish making became a source of support for farmers following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hashish has become used as a substitute form of gift exchange, as a form of cash,

and as collateral in a cash-deficit economy. However, this paper does not demonstrate the economic importance of hashish making for the local agriculture alone. I argue that many local farmers, who do not consider themselves as criminals, were able to become involved in this activity by shifting the meaning of hashish and hashish making from an illegal to a culturally valued and justifiable form of economic activity. This allows me to argue that the local drug economy in Tyup serves as a lens through which to examine the strategies of illegal and illicit means of drug production and to illustrate how they have emerged as culturally acceptable.

In general, studies on drugs in Kyrgyzstan focus on the trafficking of opium and heroin from Afghanistan in response to security issues, high-level corruption and the involvement of organized

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crime in politics, and the spread of HIV among the population (De Danieli, 2011; Goodhand, 2000; Jackson, 2005; Madi, 2004; Marat, 2006a,b). However, little is known about processes of local hashish production. In this respect, my research is among the first ethnographic studies that consider the involvement of farmers in the hashish economy and how the latter is linked to crisis in the legal economy. My research aims to shed light on these understudied aspects by exploring local hashish production in rural Kyrgyzstan. It consequently provides rich data for development of evidence-based policy making.

Although Kyrgyzstan is not the main source of drug production in the Central Asian region, it has around ten thousand hectares of wild growing cannabis (Aidarov et al., 2012). These wild growing cannabis plants are used in the production of hashish and cannabis for consumption within the country (in 2011, 18 per cent of registered drug dependent individuals in Kyrgyzstan used cannabis derivatives) and to be trafficked elsewhere, mainly to other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. Hashish and cannabis are manufactured in different parts of the country, but hashish made in the Tyup region of Issyk-Kul oblast was already well-known during Soviet times and transported to other countries in the Soviet Union but did not play an important role in the local economy of the region at that time. Hashish and cannabis were produced by members of the criminal underworld who especially travelled to the Tyup region in summer to make “ruchnik”, literally meaning ‘made by hand’. Ruchnik was one of the commonplace names for hashish during the Soviet times. The situation changed from the beginning of 1990s when hashish making became associated not only with the underworld but with the local population. Since then, hashish has played an important role in the agricultural economy of the region as surrogate money and an important asset to the local people.

Methodology

This paper derives from a mixed-method study based on 64 semi-structured interviews with producers and other concerned parties, ethnographic observations of local families, and 147 questionnaires collected over six months from 2009 to 2010. While ethnographic research was valuable in acquiring an understanding of the context of hashish making and people's attitudes towards it, a follow-up survey helped to obtain general information on the socio-economic conditions of households in the village.

The study was mainly conducted in one village which I call Toolu (the name of the village has been changed) located in the Tyup region of Issyk-Kul oblast. My choice of location was primarily determined by a set of broader questions. I wanted to explore not an illegal act in isolation but rather how an activity considered as illegal by the state, and also as immoral among local residents in the past, is transformed into an acceptable means of earning extra income for the local community. The choice was also determined by the fact that Issyk-Kul oblast had the largest areas of wild growing cannabis plants found in the region (Zelichenko, 2003).

Researchers can enter the field either through being affiliated with an official agency or simply as social scientists (Morales, 1996: p. 123). Similarly to Edmundo Morales (1996, 123), who carried out an ethnographic research on drug production in Peru and chose not to enter the field with official sponsorship due to hostile attitudes toward the government in the region, I did not want to be affiliated with either the law enforcement or local government due to the illegal nature of hashish making. An official affiliation would have dampened my ability as a researcher to build trust with the local farmers. Instead, I decided to find someone who lived in the region and stayed with the local family for I believed that personal contacts make the access to the research site easier (Reeves, 2010:

p. 318). I was fortunate to be given a telephone number of Ainura (the names of all participants have been changed), who lived in the Ak-Suu rayon of Issyk-Kul oblast and was eager to help. After two weeks and following some initial interviews in her own and other neighbouring villages, I decided to stay with her aunt Aikan who lived in Toolu village. I remained there from July until October and made week-long visits in November and December 2009, returning to conduct further fieldwork in July–September 2010.

Having a gate-keeper in an ethnographic study, especially one which focuses on illegal activities that people try to conceal from outsiders, is an important aspect of not only successful entrance to the community but also in building a rapport with participants. Through my main gate-keepers Ainura, Aikan and later Jamilya I was able to stay in the regions where hashish was made and also gain access to their networks of friends and relatives. All three women were in their mid-thirties. Ainura was a teacher in the local school, Aikan had a small business topping-up mobile phones and selling gasoline, whilst Jamilya had no job. Ainura and Aikan were not involved in hashish making but had relatives, friends and acquaintances who were in one way or another implicated in the production of hashish. Among these three, Jamilya was the only woman who made hashish on a regular basis.

Although it was not very difficult to gain access to the villages, developing trust among the people was much harder. The initial phases of the fieldwork were spent trying to develop rapport with people because despite the reassurance from my gate-keepers that I was not a spy and not working for the militia, there were some people who could not believe that I would not report them. When a news report was broadcast on the main national TV channel about hashish production in Issyk-Kul region at the end of August 2009, it was especially difficult to continue fieldwork as some believed that I had tipped-off the journalists. However, good relationships already developed with some of community members were valuable in this case. Despite such rumours, those participants whom I had most contact with defended me and confronted the rumours. Spending more time in the village and accompanying Aikan to different informal gatherings and participating in social celebrations helped me greatly in becoming accepted by her network of friends and relatives. Acceptance into Aikan's network meant that people would trust me at different gatherings she took me to, since there were many occasions when they discussed hashish making openly without hesitation. Such gatherings served an important role in creating a space for sharing the latest news. Because the militia would be making frequent visits to the villages and fields during the summer, often when women would gather together they would receive warnings of their presence in the village. They would also get information about who was collecting hashish for drug dealers and about how much someone was able to sell hashish for at that moment. During my second spell of fieldwork, spending more time with Jamilya who had made hashish for five years and “going to the fields” with her and her friends, allowed me to gain even more trust among hashish making women.

Contextualizing hashish production

In the 1990s, whole families were said to have gone together to the fields and in recollections of participants there was little differentiation between old and young, women and men. Tolubai, a male in his mid-thirties, whilst recalling hashish making in the 1990s, explained that at that time no one hid and they made hashish openly.

People started to make it [hashish] in 1994–1995, when the Soviet Union collapsed. I think for two years some were making it secretly and in mid 1990s everyone started to make it openly.

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