

# Methodological Approaches to The Study of Traditional Social Institutions

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**Abstract:** Where there are traditions and customs, no matter how modern society becomes, there are traditional social institutions characteristic of that society. Social institutions are called upon to organize joint activities of people in order to meet certain social needs. A social institution is a complex configuration of customs, traditions, beliefs, attitudes, rules-regulators, and laws that have a specific purpose and perform specific functions. A social institution is viewed as a social system. It is a system of values, norms, rules, ideals, as well as patterns of activity and behavior of people and other elements. Each of the elements performs a specific function that is important to maintain the integrity of the system. The destruction of one of the institutions of culture leads to disruptions in the system of social interaction. The important functions of a social institution include its educational function. Recently, globalization has had a huge impact not only on the socio-economic life of society, but also on the private life of people, on the formation of regional cultural values. The establishment of Soviet power could not immediately change the centuries-old canons of life of the peoples of this region. Tradition was viewed in Soviet times as a dying phenomenon, incapable of either really resisting modern forms of life, or coexisting with them.

**Keywords:** Social institutions, traditional institutions, structural-functional analysis, functionalism, ethnology, cultural heritage.

**Introduction:** One of the important components of the structure of ethnic culture is social institutions. In world ethnology, there is a great scientific and practical interest in their role in the life of modern society, since it is precisely within the framework of social institutions that the processes of socialization and self-determination of the individual take place. Research on the problem of social institutions is one of the priority areas in the development of the humanities in such foreign countries as Great Britain, Germany, France, and Russia, where social anthropology, ethnosociology, and ethnology examine various aspects of this issue.

In order to study the problem of the place and role of traditional social institutions in modern society, it is necessary to outline theoretical and methodological

approaches and to understand the essence of the concept of social institutions. The study of social institutions—their functions, structures, developmental patterns, and role in social life—depends on the method of research and methodology. The analysis of this issue is important for understanding the forms of adaptation of traditional social institutions to the social and political system of modernity.

The essence of social institutions is vividly manifested in the functions they perform. Each social institution under consideration has its own social functions: social regulation, transmission of social experience, integration, upbringing, and so on. It should be especially noted that these functions arise from the needs of society. For example, a society, with its

multifaceted connections, cannot function without regulating relations between people or without transmitting social experience.

Social institutions are the object of study of many scientific disciplines and are used in various meanings. In ethnographic science, much attention has been and continues to be devoted to the study of the problem of social institutions. By analyzing the traditional social institutions of the peoples of Central Asia, including the Karakalpaks, which have been reflected in the works of foreign and domestic ethnographers, one can to some extent form an idea of the essence and functions of social institutions.

The concept of “social institutions,” along with such notions as “culture,” “tradition,” and “custom,” has important theoretical significance in the analysis of social relations. There are many interpretations and perspectives regarding the understanding of the essence of a social institution. Attempts have been made to define this concept from philosophical, sociological, legal, and historical points of view. However, among scholars there is no single opinion on the interpretation of the concept of “social institution.” The complexity of scientific analysis is primarily due to the multidimensional nature of the social institution itself as a specific mode of human activity in the surrounding world.

The concept of “social institution” (from the Latin institutum – establishment, arrangement, custom) is one of the broad concepts used in the social sciences. The genealogy of institutional analysis traces back to the founders of sociology—A. Comte, É. Durkheim, and H. Spencer. As the primary elements of the social system, they named such social institutions as the family, cooperation, the church, and the state. H. Spencer identified six main groups of social institutions: domestic, ceremonial, professional, industrial, political, and ecclesiastical. He developed a theoretical system that included social institutions as mechanisms of self-organization of people’s collective life.

Based on these classical concepts, theories of the social institution were developed in early functionalism and in structural-functional analysis in the mid-20th century. At the same time, they differ quite significantly from sociological perspectives. In early functionalism, both A. Radcliffe-Brown and B. Malinowski considered institutions as parts of the social structure, as functions.

In sociology, this term is defined as follows: “Social institutions are historically established stable forms of organizing joint human activity... Institutions are intended to organize collective activities in order to satisfy various social needs. From this point of view, social institutions can be regarded as organized social

systems. These systems ensure similar patterns of human behavior, coordinate and direct certain aspirations, and resolve conflicts arising in the course of everyday life...”

Anthony Giddens, when analyzing such institutions as kinship, marriage, and family, writes: “Social institutions ‘cement’ social life. They provide general agreements developed by people in communication with each other, through which generational continuity is achieved.”

In ethnology, B. Malinowski provides his own definition of social institutions: “An institution as a primary organizational unit is a set of means and methods for meeting a particular need.” Social institutions have socially established and recognized norms and patterns of behavior. “With their help (social institutions – D.M.) and within their framework, individuals realize their mutual expectations, thereby achieving socially and individually significant results. Taken together, ‘social institutions’ form the socio-functional structure of society.”

In turn, A. Radcliffe-Brown offers his interpretation of social institutions: “Institutions represent stable forms through which the social life of individuals flows. The function of each ‘institution’ consists in a specific socially significant task, in the satisfaction of a concrete basic need, in the realization of group interests.”

At the beginning of the 20th century, T. Veblen defined a social institution as a set of social customs and norms in which people’s way of thinking and way of life are embodied, and which are transmitted from generation to generation. Many contemporary sociologists interpret a social institution as a complex configuration of customs, traditions, beliefs, attitudes, regulatory rules, and laws that serve a specific purpose and perform particular functions. In other words, social institutions must interact as an integrated whole to ensure the integration of society as a whole.

Overall, a social institution represents an organized system of relations and social norms that unites the most significant social values and procedures, thereby meeting the basic needs of society.

First of all, a social institution is considered as a social system. It is a system of values, norms, rules, ideals, as well as models of human activity and behavior and other elements, which guarantees uniformity of behavior, coordinates and directs certain aspirations, establishes ways of meeting needs, and ensures the equilibrium and stability of society. “The systemic approach consists in viewing any more or less complex object as a relatively autonomous system with its own features of functioning and development.”

The American sociologist Talcott Parsons defined society as a system of relations between people based on norms and values that form culture. The relationships between structural units, in turn, are built on the basis of functions that ensure the survival of society as a whole.

A.K. Aliev, when speaking about the system of social functions performed by traditions and customs, distinguishes between the main functions inherent to them and the auxiliary, secondary ones. "The main functions—he writes—(as with any other social phenomenon) can be distinguished from auxiliary ones on the basis of two criteria. First, these functions must be universal, i.e., present everywhere where traditions and customs exist; second, they must be specific to traditions and customs." A similar criterion can be applied to social institutions. For example, the reproductive function—biological reproduction of the population—is specific only to the family institution, while the educational or regulatory function is considered almost universal, characteristic of all social institutions. Each element of a social institution, by performing certain functions, is interconnected and interacts in a particular way, ultimately forming distinct social institutions.

Structural-functional analysis presents society as a system that includes stable elements as well as the ways of connections between these elements. These elements, together with the modes of their interrelations, constitute the structure of the system. Each element performs a specific function that is essential for maintaining the system's integrity. According to the representatives of this approach, the main task of research is to identify the elements of the system, their functions, and the ways of connection between them.

B. Malinowski conducted research on the functionality of social institutions within the structure of culture as a whole—on their role and significance for the functioning of the cultural organism. In particular, he demonstrated that the destruction of one of the cultural institutions leads to disruptions in the system of social interaction. The function of an institution is understood as the role it plays in the holistic system of social integration of which it is a part.

On the basis of the function of social regulation, which can be considered one of the earliest functions of a social institution, lie "norms and rules which, through repeated practice and transmission from generation to generation, were shaped into 'unwritten laws'—traditions and customs." "The regulatory function is manifested in three aspects: (a) expressing attitudes toward people's actions and deeds, approving some

while condemning others; (b) reinforcing conformity, fostering the need to follow group norms; (c) developing behavioral stereotypes and consolidating them to the level of habit."

Another function of social institutions is the transmission of social experience. Through social institutions, social experience is passed from generation to generation.

The next integrating function of social institutions ensures the social unity of a particular community. Among the important functions of social institutions one should also note their educational function.

When speaking about the necessity of studying social institutions at the present stage, it should be emphasized that in recent times globalization has had a tremendous impact not only on the socio-economic life of society but also on people's private lives and on the formation of regional cultural values. M.B. Gimbatova rightly evaluates the significance of national heritage when speaking of the threat of global globalization, as if foreseeing its future: "The study of the heritage of the older generation... is based not only on the growth of the people's culture and ethnic self-awareness, but also on the fear for their future, which is threatened by the idea of universal globalization that in recent years has gripped a part of humanity, endangering the very existence of national cultures and ethnic groups."

In the 1960s, scholars' perspectives on tradition itself began to change. According to the American orientalist L. Pye, in some cases forced modernization, instead of leading to social progress, "may cause a wide range of very profound destructive reactions that threaten to disrupt the identity of individuals." Modernization connected with borrowing from outside is practically impossible without relying on traditional value systems that foster the reproduction of the ethnocultural self-identification of society and ensure its integration. Authors writing on modernization seek to explain not only its positive but also its negative aspects, emphasizing that national values must be taken into account in the modernization process.

A.K. Aliev, making a comparative analysis of the role of traditions and customs in modern society, writes: "The displacement of custom by a more modern way of transmitting social experience does not imply its complete disappearance from the normative systems of modern societies." "No matter what heights the development of society reaches, it will always preserve simple, stereotypically functioning relations regulated by customs." Accordingly, where traditions and customs exist, no matter how modern a society becomes, the traditional social institutions

characteristic of that society remain active, since traditions and customs constitute one of the fundamental components of social institutions.

In this regard, one cannot but agree with the Russian scholar N.P. Lobacheva, who for many years studied the culture of the peoples of Central Asia: "The establishment of Soviet power could not immediately change the centuries-old canons of life of the peoples of this region. Despite the processes of transformation that altered and reshaped the social structure of these peoples, institutions of a social nature, ancient in their genesis, are still found among them today, clearly recognizable and influencing life in many of its manifestations."

If this is connected with a specific state ideology, the purpose of which was to classify all the cultural heritage of the people as obsolete survivals of the past, then in ethnological science until recently a similar evolutionist view of the progressive–staged development of society was also widespread. This led to the fact that "traditional institutions, customs, and modes of thinking were regarded as obstacles to the development of society. In essence, researchers' interest was focused on the problems of modernization.... Tradition was viewed as a phenomenon that was dying out, incapable either of genuinely resisting modern forms of life or of coexisting with them."

That is, this confirms the fact that local traditions were neither studied nor considered as a real functioning phenomenon in society. "The community (village or neighborhood—guzar, mahalla), the family-kinship group, and age-based associations in the works (in the works of Soviet ethnographers – D.M.), if mentioned at all, were noted only in passing. At the same time, ethnographers were well aware of the existence of these institutions, but they were studied as independent units of the social organism that had existed in the past, outside any connection with the surrounding world."

From this, it is clear that the object itself was studied in isolation, and accordingly, "social institutions" as interconnected elements of a unified system of social development were neither studied nor employed under such a generalizing concept. Therefore, it is difficult to find in their works a detailed explanation of this term. The objective study of the history and culture of peoples was hindered by the ideological tendency of that time to classify all national traditions and customs, especially those of a religious character, as "survivals," even though traditional social institutions always played a significant role in the everyday life of the people.

All these and other scientific approaches, as well as the existing understandings of the concept of a social institution in science, make it possible to examine the objects of study from the standpoint of the subject of research. Identifying the origins of the people's social institutions, like many other issues of ethnological science, remains a difficult and problematic question that requires special study.

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