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# Kyrgyz Nomadic Customs and the Impact of Re-Islamization after Independence

Elmira M. Kuchumkulova

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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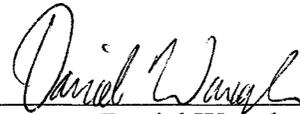
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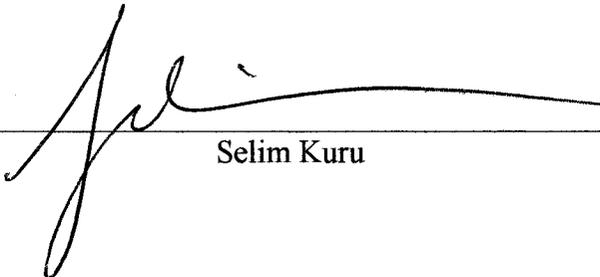
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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Reading Committee:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
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**Abstract**

Kyrgyz Nomadic Customs and the Impact of  
Re-Islamization after Independence

Elmira M. Kuchumkulova

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Professor Stevan Harrell  
Department of Anthropology

This dissertation deals with three major issues: Kyrgyz nomadic customs, Islamic revival, and the emergence of a new national ideology, *Tengirchilik*. These three factors have current significance in post-Soviet Kyrgyz society and in the development of Kyrgyz national identity. The socio-cultural legacy of nomadic life and the worldview of *Tengirchilik*, which are closely related to each other, conflict with fundamentalist Islamic ideas and practices, which come from outside. In the past, the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz easily adopted Sufism, especially the veneration of Sufi saints, because its idea of “saint worship” was similar to their native religious concept of “ancestor cult.” Today, unlike Sufism, which was tolerant of people’s traditional religious beliefs and practices, foreign and underground Islamic fundamentalist groups in Kyrgyzstan, such as *Hizb-ut Tahrir al-Islamiyya* (Party of Islamic Liberation), are becoming intolerant towards many Kyrgyz customs and religious practices, and condemn them as *bid’ah*, idolatrous innovations. In Kyrgyzstan, the clash between “normative Islam” and “local Islam” is most evident in traditional religious practices and customs, such as funerals. Traditional funeral rituals among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs form an institutionalized custom, which is deeply connected with the socio-economic necessities of nomadic life, and that they were able to survive by incorporating some Islamic practices. However, the core native customs and rituals continue to play a significant role in Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies. In response to the competing Islamic and Christian religious activities in their countries, native Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals are trying to revive the ancient, but living worldview of *Tengirchilik*, which comes from the Old Turkic word *Tängri* (Sky/God). To replace the commonly accepted term “shamanism,” which focuses on the figure of the

shaman, native intellectuals coined a new term, *Tengirchilik*, by systematizing all the native religious beliefs and practices shared by Turkic peoples. The advocates of *Tengirchilik* believe that this ancient worldview offers much more sophisticated views about life and the world than other world religions such as Islam and Christianity. *Tengirchilik* might find universal support in the future, especially among international environmental organizations, for it treats Nature as God and puts it above everything.



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<sup>1</sup> All the family pictures are the courtesy of my father Mamatkerim Köchümkulov and Elmira Kuchumkulova.

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## TRANSLITERATION GUIDE

Kyrgyz Letters	Transliteration	Kyrgyz spelling	Transliteration
Ж ж	J j	Жайлоо	Jayloo
Ү ү	Ü ü	Түндүк	Tündük
Ө ө	Ö ö	Көк	Kök
Ы ы	İ ĩ	Ыспы	İspĩ
И и	I i	Билим	Bilim
Й й	Y y	Боз үй	Boz üy
ң	ng	Миң	Ming
Ш ш	Sh sh	Бишкек	Bishkek
Ч ч	Ch ch	Чүй	Chüy

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## DEDICATION

*Бул диссертациямды маркум чоң атам Кочкорбайдын жана Абдыкерим  
акемдин жаркын элесине багыштаймын.*

*I dedicate this dissertation to the spirits of my late paternal grandfather  
Kochkorbay and my paternal uncle Abdikerim.*

## Introduction: Theory and Methodology

As a newcomer to the western field of anthropology and ethnography, I became overwhelmed with the complex, diverse, ambiguous, and fluid nature of anthropological theories and approaches applied to human subjects.

In the 1980's, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's new concept of "the invention of tradition"<sup>1</sup> called anthropologists to explore "the politics of culture" in postcolonial nation states. It maintains that the so-called "old traditions" invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and argues that many of those "traditions" are "actually invented, constructed and formally instituted."<sup>2</sup>

Nicholas Thomas raises an important issue in his attempt to define the goal of writing about culture: "The most vital questions to address are perhaps not: what do we need to preserve or defend in particular disciplinary frameworks? Or, what are the respective strengths of anthropology and cultural studies? But: who are we writing or creating representations for? And what do we want to tell them?"<sup>3</sup> Then there are other scholars, like Lewellen, who opposes the "degree of postmodernist rejectionism." He is critical of postmodernism's "unique" ability to reject all the grand theories, but its failure to validate its statements. According to Lewellen, "A reader has the right to ask of any

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<sup>1</sup> *The Invention of Tradition*. Ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Thomas, "Becoming Undisciplined: Anthropology and Cultural Studies," In: *Anthropological Theory Today*. Edited by Henrietta L. Moore. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p. 277.

non-fiction text, “Why should I believe this? What are the criteria by which I should judge this to be true than what others say on this subject?”<sup>4</sup> He further states:

Each country or region or even community has its own dynamics, which are unique combinations of the traditional, the national, and the global. Although postmodernism may critique Western domination, and its relativistic philosophy has been amenable to many Third World scholars, it was not developed to deal with some postmodern conditions in the Third World. As a result, there is no reason to privilege postmodern theories.<sup>5</sup>

Theorizing is still an ongoing process in postmodern anthropology. Therefore, the validity of many current theories in most scholarly fields, including postmodernist anthropology, may last until the world/earth and the peoples and societies that inhabit it experience another major geo-political and cultural change. Kyrgyz epic singers, as thinkers of their time, have long realized change as a natural phenomenon and thus approached their subject, i.e., the study of oral history, through epic poems such as *Manas*:

Mountains fell apart, turning into ravines,  
Ravines shook, turning into mountains.  
Many seas became extinct  
Leaving only their names behind.  
**Every fifty years, people were new,**  
**Every hundred years the earth was renewed.**

Studying a society and its culture, especially that of the “Others” and putting their knowledge in a theoretical framework and finally representing them to the other “Others” i.e., the foreign audience, is indeed a very complex and difficult task. By reading some of

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<sup>4</sup> Lewellen, Ted C. *The Anthropology of Globalization. Cultural Anthropology Enters the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Westport, Connecticut, London: Bergin & Garvey, 2002, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

the key works written by western anthropologists about other cultures, I learned first of all how the western mind and thinking works in general and sees other cultures.

In my research, I was faced with the dilemma how to approach and interpret my subject of study, the Kyrgyz nomadic culture. Should I repudiate, as some postmodernists suggest, the study of culture as being whole and homogenous in favor of “ethnographies of particular”? As a native scholar, who has received her academic training in the West, how do I approach my native culture? What is my position as author and my goal in representing some socio-cultural aspects of the society in which I grew up? Should I do my best to convince my readers about the validity of my statements and claims?

It is my personal opinion that ethnographers should not look for cultural issues and problems which are foreign or have little significance to the local people. Those “ethnographies of particular” or individuals, who do not quite conform to or fit into his/her traditional society, may find more value and appreciation in western society, because the main target for many ethnographic works is the western readership. As implied earlier, throughout its history, western anthropology employed many theoretical and methodological approaches and changes in studying other cultures. Western ethnographic writings passed through their traditional trend or “process of othering” other native cultures and now it seems to search for new, more “humane” methods which would not necessarily represent other culture as being different from the western world. This approach, in my opinion, is irrelevant and artificial. We can and should still portray other peoples and their cultures as being different or “strange” if they are indeed so. It is our obligation as intellectuals and scholars not just to identify our differences, but also to explain them within their contexts and finally teach our readers to respect and tolerate

those cultural and religious differences. In other words, it is not right to pick and choose those issues, which mostly interest the western audience in the name of subverting the “process of othering.”

I also believe that society and its social structure are never static, but rather in constant change as well as continuity. However, the results of my research in Kizil-Jar did not fully confirm the idea of non-existence of coherent and whole societies. The case of the Kyrgyz people in Kizil-Jar shows that representatives of one particular culture, in this case the formerly nomadic culture can exist in “stable equilibrium” and thus create a “concept of culture” or “cultural whole”. I personally was not interested in studying the ethnography of a particular family or person within the Kyrgyz society. What interested me the most was to explain to my western audience, “the others,” why certain traditional customs among the Kyrgyz, are resistant to changes that are coming from outside, e.g., from Islam. At the same time, my work highlights the differences within Kyrgyz society and discusses a field of discourse or conversation in which people disagree with each other, but within a framework where they understand the disagreements. In other words, I address not only why do certain funeral rituals persist, but why are there Islamists and Tengirists and how do these opposing groups of intellectuals argue with each other.

In my view, studies that are done by some foreign researchers tend to reflect those cultural values and concepts of which he/she is a bearer. Most ethnographers who study other cultures are from developed western countries and societies where individualism and individual rights are more valued and respected than those of the society. The concepts of traditional culture and ideas of collective or communal identity or communal interests in general have negative connotations in the west.

During my interview, I asked a Kyrgyz intellectual, Choyun Ömüraliev,<sup>6</sup> whether there is such a thing called “Kyrgyz traditional society” today. He gave the following interesting answer:

Yes, there is. However, in the west, people see it [tradition] as a negative concept. They also consider nomads and nomadism as being negative. It is because the concept of tradition comes from the ancient Greeks. In Greece, tradition did not reach its classical form but remained in its primitive state because they introduced human rights, law and civil state. Therefore, in their view, tradition still remains primitive, whereas, in our society, tradition has been filtered and modified during the course of thousands of years and only the pure, golden stem remained thus reaching the highest peak of morality. When westerners think of a traditional society, they imagine the ancient Greek society and automatically copy its image to our society. They mostly see and explain tradition in their own way with no wish to understanding what we have inside.

The term for “tradition” in Kyrgyz is *salt*, which also means “custom.” Like many other peoples in the world, the Kyrgyz did not have the understanding of the concept of a “traditional society” when referring to their own society and culture. This concept is known among Kyrgyz scholars only. Ordinary Kyrgyz did not and do not question the negative or positive sides of *salt*. Unlike in the west, the term *salt* has a positive connotation in most contexts. Whenever, the Kyrgyz, especially the elderly and intellectuals, talk about their *salt*, they stress that traditions and customs need to be preserved, for they are full of wisdom and lessons for life.

I could not apply the approach of “ethnographies of particular” suggested by Lila Abu-Lughod<sup>7</sup> to my study of Kyrgyz nomadic culture. If I had done ten or thirty

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<sup>6</sup> Choyun Ömüraliev is an independent journalist and writer and also the author of the book called *Tengirchilik* (1991). See Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion of his theory and analysis of the ancient worldview of *Tengirchilik*.

“ethnographies of particular” or individuals among the Kyrgyz, I would have ended up getting similar results on traditional customs and religious values. My approach definitely conformed to cohesion and homogeneity. There was less “chaos” and more cohesion in the life of the Kyrgyz people living in Kizil-Jar. And it is those customs and values to which the majority of the Kyrgyz conform that I wanted to address and analyze in my research.

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<sup>7</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila, “Writing Against Culture” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Richard Fox, ed. Sante Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991.

## Chapter I: “Fieldwork” in the Native “Field”

By putting an exclusive focus on the object(s) of study, which are people, the traditional practice and discipline of anthropology had underestimated the significance of the role and status of the person conducting the study, the researcher. Today, the postmodern approach and methodology of fieldwork strongly encourages or “requires” from anthropologists that they identify their status and position clearly to the people under study, and write explicitly about their fieldwork experiences, especially when they conduct their work in so-called “indigenous” or “native” cultures. Modern anthropologists openly share their personal accounts of their experiences in foreign communities, talk about the process of adjustment to another culture, and discuss the ethical and pragmatic challenges of conducting ethnographic fieldwork. In short, an anthropologist tells his/her audience “what it means to be an anthropologist.”<sup>8</sup> This new ethnographic approach, called “reflexive writing,” enables the reader to get a fuller and more intimate picture of the fieldwork experience, of what it took for the author to gather the necessary materials. In other words, scholars have recognized the fact that the fieldworker's position makes a difference in what is written and how.

About two decades ago, the practice of ethnography was the task of mainly western anthropologists, today, as cultural anthropology enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the age of globalization, western anthropologists are sharing human subjects, still largely dealing with non-western societies, with their native colleagues. However, since the field of

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<sup>8</sup> *Women in the Field. Anthropological Experiences*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Ed. by Peggy Goldie. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986, p. 4.



anthropology as an academic discipline was founded in the West, western anthropological theories, fieldwork approaches, and methodologies still play a dominant role in anthropological world scholarship. This draws native anthropologists to western institutions, where they receive their academic training in anthropology, and then conduct their fieldwork in their own cultures. As a result of this anthropological globalization, several terms have been coined in regard to the status and identity of fieldworkers, such as “outsider,” “insider,” “foreign,” “western,” “native,” and “halfie,” or “hybrid.” Some native scholars question and challenge some of the western approaches and methodologies applied to non-western cultures and societies. There are disagreements not only *between* the two groups, native and western, but also *within* each group as to whose account is more authentic. The presence of non-western anthropologists has opened up a dialogue of various viewpoints by people from both sides of the divide.

All fieldworkers, native and non-native alike, share one common feature: “The research worker is not just an average representative of his culture; he has a unique personality of his own by which his description will be colored, just as it is affected by his general cultural conditioning.”<sup>9</sup> In another words, the researcher’s description is similar to a painting in which one sees the painter’s “self portrait” or “self projection.”<sup>10</sup> Like romantics and realists, both native and foreign anthropologists also have different personalities, minds, and tastes, which affect their description or interpretation of another

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Op.cit.

culture. However, it is said that even a realist person will present “a slanted picture” of the people/culture by transporting some of his personality.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned earlier, postmodern anthropology recognizes the significance of the researcher’s personality, status and identity in the practice of ethnography. As Peggy Goldie notes: “There is a need for more open speculation and consideration of such issues as: how were my data affected by the kind of person I am, by my sex or other apparent attributes, and how did my presence alter, positively or negatively, the flux of life under observation?”<sup>12</sup> It needs to be added that the researcher’s ability to speak the language of the people with whom he/she is working with is the utmost requirement. One always needs to question the quality of the information gathered through interpreters. The researcher’s personality is also very important in acquiring their trust or distrust. It is also a challenge for an outsider, whose behavioral manners and thinking have solidified in his or her own culture, to fit into a foreign culture. The western view, understanding, and experience of a non-western culture and society will differ to a large extent from that of a native scholar. We learn this when reading personal accounts describing the socio-cultural experiences of western scholars who conduct their fieldwork in far away and strange “fields.” American anthropologists admit the fact that outsider fieldworkers “can never become or go native.” During their fieldwork, many foreign fieldworkers symbolically go through a process generally known as “culture shock,” a term coined by Ruth Benedict. Culture shock is described as a “syndrome precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all your familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse.”<sup>13</sup> Native

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<sup>11</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> *Women in the Field*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

researchers do not necessarily experience these negative experiences during their fieldwork in their own society. Unfortunately, the majority of American anthropologists conduct their fieldwork in other countries with very little or with no knowledge of the local people's language and work with questionable interpreters usually native speakers living on the fringe of their own society.

Another difference in the approach of native and foreign anthropologists to the study of culture is that native scholars mostly focus on their people's folk traditions. This is often interpreted by the outsider anthropologists as evidence of "nationalism." Native anthropologists are believed to be interested in the "propaganda mission of showing their culture to the world, and as such are much more interested in showing off their epics than their systems of marriage relations."<sup>14</sup> For many native scholars and for their societies, however, marriage and gender are considered to be common issues found in every society, but the cultural uniqueness of "backward" societies can be found in the art of oral creativity as, e.g., in epic songs and traditional poetry.

Western theories, methodologies and approaches do not always work for understanding non-westerners and their cultures. A Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, eloquently and powerfully critiques the dominant research methodologies and approaches to so-called "indigenous" peoples and their cultures, and proposes a valuable research agenda for indigenous scholars. Like the Estonian scholar Tasnas Hofer, she argues that Western education inhibits indigenous scholars from writing from a "real" or indigenous point of view. If they do write from a traditional point of view, they are criticized as

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<sup>14</sup> Notes from Stevan Harrell, Anthropologist at the University of Washington, Seattle

being “naïve,” “nativist,” or “illogical.”<sup>15</sup> There should not be just one (Western) approach dominating *any* academic field, *especially* not the study of mankind. Unlike outsiders, many insider or native scholars cannot easily detach themselves from their own people or society and Western/American scholars can also not detach themselves from their own society. But even though many “indigenous,” or “native” peoples are physically no longer living in the colonial world, the psychological legacy of colonialism has not yet disappeared. Western scholarship needs to understand these important variables and give enough space for native scholars to voice their views and interpretations freely.

### The Term “Fieldwork”

Before discussing my own identity as a native researcher or “fieldworker,” I would like to discuss briefly the very Western concept of “fieldwork.” Although modern anthropologists live and write their ethnographic works in the post-colonial world, the legacy of colonialist anthropology survived in its essential practice of “fieldwork.” Many anthropologists agree that the term “fieldwork” itself reflects the old traditional western and colonialist mentality and attitude towards non-western peoples and their lands. Fieldwork is still carried out largely by anthropologists and sociologists from the West, and mostly targeted towards non-western societies and cultures. Like many scholars, I not only find the term to be obsolete, but also disrespectful of and discriminatory towards non-western human subjects. To be specific, for me the word “field” connotes the idea and image of a wild and uninhabited place. To say that a “fieldworker conducts or

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London; New York: Zed Books Press; Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999, p. 14.

carries out fieldwork,” in a literal sense, means that he/she does “farm work on the field.” In other words, there is no logical connection between the term and the actual work or activity that the researcher does. It is obvious from the term that when the practice of fieldwork was developed, western anthropologists imagined themselves as civilized men going out to remote, unknown wilds, “fields“ or “bushes,” and living with “savages.” Although the modern fieldwork site is no longer limited to non-western peoples and their homelands, I still think that anthropologists, both native and western, should come up with a better term that is current and more respectful of the human beings and places under study. Perhaps, “ethnographic research” or “work with human beings” would suit the description better.

As mentioned earlier, the conductors of modern anthropological fieldwork are not just Westerners any more. Unlike Western anthropologists who go out to remote “fields” in unknown or strange societies or villages, I went to my own hometown to do my “fieldwork.” I was “physically displaced” from western/American culture and society, which were foreign to me, and was re-placed into my own Kyrgyz society and culture. And my identity was not just as a native researcher but I had the luxury or advantage of possessing “double native” status. Not only did I conduct my research in my home country, Kyrgyzstan, but I did it in my very own hometown, in southern Kyrgyzstan where I grew up. This unique factor alone puts me in a very different position from many outsiders, and even from other native anthropologists who do not work in their own villages and towns. I have always wondered why most non-western anthropologists, studying at western institutions, end up studying their own cultures. As the Univ. of Washington anthropology professor Steven Harrell notes:

It's interesting, though, that so many do work in their own home towns. There is a respectable position that says distancing, the shock of the new, is necessary to certain kinds of insight. To this end, I always want my students from China or Taiwan to do some ethnographic research in the US, so they will have the experience of the cultural encounter while gathering information. It's interesting also, that when US anthropologists do ethnographic research in the US, they almost never do it in their hometowns or home communities.<sup>16</sup>

As has been described above, in writing ethnography, it is critically important to know about the author who constructs cultural knowledge and represents another culture to his/her target audience. Therefore, I hope that my readers will appreciate the following personal information that I provide about myself, and find it helpful in understanding my interpretations of my own culture, particularly in regards to important socio-cultural aspects of the legacy of the nomadic culture in which I am deeply rooted.

### My Personal, Family, and Academic Backgrounds

As we all know, any person's identity, like culture, is not fixed in time and space. It is always contingent upon his or her family, tribal, or ethnic backgrounds as well as upon situation and location in which he or she is. If a Kyrgyz inquires about my identity, I would first say that my name is Elmira and that I am from the Aksı region of southern Kyrgyzstan. When I say that I am from Aksı, the Kyrgyz person, if he/she knows the historical geographic distribution of Kyrgyz tribes in the country, will guess that I belong to the Saruu,<sup>17</sup> one of the major tribal groups, which in turn belongs to the Sol (Left) division. Within the Saruu, I belong to the Ogotur (< ok atar, lit.: "arrow/bullet shooter,"

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<sup>16</sup> Prof. Stevan Harrell's personal written comments. September, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 2 where I talk about the region of Aksı.

i.e., “hunter.”) *uruk*, clan.<sup>18</sup> If a non-Kyrgyz asks me who I am, I would simply say that I am a Kyrgyz from Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia.

Like many other Kyrgyz, I take pride in my Ogotur *uruk*, clan and in knowing about my seven forefathers, of whom I personally got to know three: my father Mamatkerim (born 1951), grandfather Kochkorbay (1930-2003)<sup>19</sup> and my great grandfather Köchümkul (1906-1986).<sup>20</sup> I was very close to my paternal grandparents, who gave me a unique childhood and upbringing by raising me in the traditional nomadic lifestyle in the mountains of southern Kyrgyzstan. I am the first of my parents’ five children, and I was raised in a Kyrgyz family with a long nomadic tradition. Like all Kyrgyz in the past, my ancestors on both sides have been nomads/herders for many centuries.

When I was one year old, my parents had recently begun their teaching careers at a local school in Kizil-Jar, my hometown in southern Kyrgyzstan. My *tayene*, maternal grandmother, kindly offered her help to take care of me in her mountain village Ak-Suu, which is about sixty kilometers away from Kizil-Jar. My *tayene* had only three children, two sons and one daughter, my mother, who were all grown up and married. She was happy to help her daughter raise me. When my mother told my paternal great grandfather Köchümkul, whose name I carry as my last name, that she had given me to her mother to be raised until they were settled down with their lives, he was angry with her and immediately sent her to bring me back. My mother often tells me and other people about

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<sup>18</sup> In English, the terms “tribe” and “clan” have negative connotations meaning backwards and wild people, whereas, in Kyrgyz, they carry a very positive meaning which gives people a sense of pride in their identity.

<sup>19</sup> I attended his funeral during my “fieldwork.”

<sup>20</sup> About him see the Chapter 3.

her great father-in-law's very important decision about my childhood fate. My Sakal Ata (“(White) Bearded Grandpa”), which was my great grandfather's nickname given to him by his grandchildren, said to my mother: “Go right now and bring Elmira back! If she is raised in Ak-Suu by the Agīnay (my mother's clan), she will become ‘bölök östü,’” (i.e., she will be estranged from her own clan). Then he called his oldest daughter-in-law, Kumu, who is my grandmother, and said, in a decisive tone: “Kumu, you have raised ten children of your own (of whom three died at various ages), you should be able to take care of another child as well. Take Elmira into your own care and raise her among our own *uruk*, (clan)!” My mother did not say anything and went to her mother's village. My *tayene* was a bit upset when my mother explained the situation, and she said: “May your own child be a blessing to yourselves (i.e., to the Ogotur), I only wanted to help you!” Thus, my Sakal Ata played a key role in the formation of my childhood identity. Not that my tribal identity would have been changed to another clan, in this case the Agīnay, but that in traditional Kyrgyz society which is based on a patrilineal system, it is considered a loss of one's tribal dignity and pride for a child to be raised by another tribe. I was a one-year-old toddler, barely walking, when I was sent to my paternal grandparents, whose youngest child, my uncle Nuralī, was only four years old. Nuralī was very jealous of his mother. We lived in yurts, and moved from pasture to pasture five or six times during the six months of the summer period. Our main daily activities included milking mares to make *koumiss*, milking cows to make yogurt, cheese and butter, making felt, tending sheep, collecting dung and wood for fuel, and finally, for children, playing all kinds of traditional games and picking flowers in the meadow. Besides this daily work, we enjoyed occasional feasts and gatherings involving traditional horse games such as





Figure 1: My mother and I, 1976



Figure 2: My paternal great grandparents Köchümkul and Rapia, my mother Suusar and me, 1975



Figure 3: My paternal grandfather Kochkorbay and grandmother Kumu, 1996



Figure 4: My grandmother (first from left), mother (middle), aunts, cousins, and me (second from right), *Īspī jayloo*, 1977



Figure 5: My uncles and aunts playing *köz tangmay* (Blind Man's Buff), İspi, 1970s



Figure 6: Kyrgyz herders in the *İspi jayloo*, 1970s



Figure 7: My paternal uncles Mırza and Mırzakal, İspi, 1970s



Figure 8: A scene from a *kirkim*, shearing sheep's wool, İspi, 1970s





Figure 9: My father Mamatkerim playing *komuz*, İspī, 1970s.



Figure 10: My paternal grandfather Kochkorbay, great uncles Anarbay and Anarkul,  
Behind them are their wives: my grandmother Kumu and great aunts Anarkül and  
Bakīkan, 1999

*bayge*, horse races, *ulak*, a game played by a group of horsemen who fight over a goat's carcass filled with coarse wet salt, *er english*, wrestling on horseback, *kiz kuumay*, a young man on horse back chasing a girl, who is also on horse back, and *kürösh*, wrestling on the ground.

I am, therefore, a product of the traditional nomadic life style and culture which continues to be practiced by some contemporary Kyrgyz families who own large numbers of livestock.

During WW II, like many other Kyrgyz who led a nomadic life, my great grandfather, Köchümkul, with his three young boys, fled to the oasis regions of modern day Uzbekistan in the Ferghana Valley in order to avoid mobilization to the front line. In the 1970's, my great grandfather and his wife took some of their grandsons and returned to their previous traditional winter place in the hills of Kizil-Jar in southern Kyrgyzstan. But his three sons, who by then had all married Kyrgyz wives and had children, remained in Uzbekistan until the mid 1990s. They were hired by the local Uzbek collective farm as herders, because the sedentary Uzbeks could not take care of large numbers of animals, so they left that profession to the more experienced Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz herders and the livestock that they took care of were housed in the old existing caravan *sarays*, which were used by traveling traders and merchants before the Soviet occupation. Uzbekistan leased the mountain pastures in southern Kyrgyzstan where they sent my grandparents and uncles during the summer time for about six months with the collective farm's animals. The Kyrgyz herders in Uzbekistan lived peacefully with their Uzbek neighbors by participating in each other's feasts and gatherings. However, they very consciously

kept their Kyrgyz and nomadic identity separate from the sedentary Sarts, who are now called Uzbeks. (See Chapter 3).

Until the age of six, I lived during the winter with my grandparents at the Uzbek *kolkhoz*, collective farm, called “Pobeda” (“Galaba” in Uzbek), i.e., “Victory,” referring to the Soviet victory over fascist Germany. When I reached school age, I involuntarily returned to my own parents. But until the age of fourteen, during the summer school vacations, I begged my parents to send me to the *jayloo*, summer pastures, to live with my grandparents who raised me. It was very hard for a little girl like me to be separated from my grandparents, for whom I had developed very close feelings and attachment. Until today, I call my grandmother “apa,” mother, and my birth mother I call “apchi,” older sister. I never felt comfortable calling my own mother “apa.” The separation from my grandparents was indeed a great psychological trauma which lasted for a long time. However, some summers, I was lucky to join my grandparents in the *jayloo*..

My first trip to the *jayloo* was when I was only three weeks old. I was born in May when herders would already been in the *jayloo*, and my father and mother took me to the mountains to join my paternal grandparents. My aunts and uncles remember seeing me for the first time when my father brought me on horseback hidden inside his *ton*, traditional fur coat worn by men. They say that I was very tiny (I weighed 2.7 kilograms, a little under six pounds at birth) and that when other children asked my father what he was hiding inside his *ton*, he replied: “It is a bird.” My mother very often recalls the cold weather and difficult conditions of nomadic life in the mountains. She says that I was tied into the cradle during the entire night to keep me warm and dry, because the cradle has at the bottom a ceramic pot into which the baby can urinate. They say I was “iylaak,” I cried

a lot. As the first and oldest daughter-in-law in the family, my mother did most of the work around the household, or “yurthold,” such as cooking, washing, milking, helping to make felt-and so on. However, all of this work was not new to her since she also had led a nomadic life before she married my father. In short, I spent most of my early and late childhood in the midst of nomadic life and culture, which I enjoyed tremendously. Therefore, I know nomadic life and culture from within, and it is part of my personal identity as a Kyrgyz from the Ogotur clan.

Another interesting part of my life was that I also got to experience the sedentary life and culture in an Uzbek village, which was completely different from the nomadic life that I led in the mountains with my Kyrgyz grandparents. Every year, after spending five to six months in the mountains, we used to return to our winter place in the above mentioned Uzbek collective farm, where we lived side by side with sedentary Uzbeks, who were farmers and merchants. There was only one main road, which passed through the village. From the two sides of the road, one entered into typical sedentary neighborhoods with narrow streets, small, neatly kept ditches, and mud houses and courtyards, surrounded by high mud walls. In the summer time, the streets were clean, cool, and shady due to the care of the Uzbek women, particularly the daughter-in-laws. Every day, they would wake up early in the morning, sweep the courtyard, take buckets and sprinkle water on the ground of their courtyard in order to make the ground cooler. *Majnun tal*, trees akin to weeping willows, mulberry and various fruits trees grew on the sides of the streets, creating cool shade. Every Uzbek home had a beautiful tall grape arbor in the courtyard creating a shady place to sit on a *sörü*, a big square wooden platform. In the autumn, when we returned from our summer pastures to the Uzbek

village, all the grapes-and other fruits, such as apples and pomegranates, would be ripe. We, the nomadic children would get already impatient to reach the village and eat all the fruits and vegetables of our sedentary Uzbek neighbors. Upon arriving in the village, we would kill a sheep and invite our Uzbek neighbors, who would bring us fruits and freshly baked hot *somsas* (pastries filled with meat and onions and baked in a clay *tandoor* oven. These and many other experiences meant that while growing up in southern Kyrgyzstan, which is part of the Ferghana Valley, I had a wonderful opportunity to experience both Uzbek and Kyrgyz culture.<sup>21</sup>

As I mentioned above, I had to return to my own parents when it was time to go school. My parents were still living in the Kyrgyz town Kizil-Jar, a former state farm, which borders the Namangan province of Uzbekistan. My entire schooling from the 1st through the 11<sup>th</sup> grades was in Kyrgyz.

Our state farm was and still is one of the most agriculturally developed regions in Kyrgyzstan, specializing in growing cotton and tobacco. During the Soviet period, Kyrgyz herders' families and their school children living in Uzbekistan were excused from all the duties related to growing and picking cotton, because they had to be in the mountain pastures with their livestock. They needed their children to help with driving the animals to the pastures in the high mountains, whereas all university students and school children in Uzbekistan had to stop their studies and pick the "white gold." Living

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<sup>21</sup> Uzbek and Kyrgyz languages are closely related to each other. While living in Uzbekistan with my grandparents, I learned to speak Uzbek fluently and went to an Uzbek school for a very short period. In southern Kyrgyzstan we get many Uzbek TV channels, which have more interesting programs than Kyrgyz national TV. I like Uzbek music and dance. When I was young, I would entertain my maternal relatives, who live in a purely Kyrgyz mountainous region and have no contact with Uzbeks and Russians, by singing rhythmic traditional and pop Uzbek songs, using the back of a large aluminum plate as a drum. My mountain Kyrgyz relatives would jokingly call me "sarttin kizi," which means "You are the daughter of a Sart! (merchant, townsman)".

in Kizil-Jar, I always envied my uncles and cousins in Uzbekistan who were able to escape the unbearable summer heat and all the difficult agricultural work in the fields, such as growing and picking tobacco and cotton. During harvest time school children had to work in the cotton and tobacco fields. I especially hated to work on the tobacco field, because it smelled very bad and was labor-intensive and time-consuming. Everything - picking, stringing, drying, and sorting the dry leaves, all had to be done by hand. I would long for the cool mountain pastures, but I had no choice but to help my parents, and also, like my other classmates, to help our state farm fulfill the cotton plan.

In 1992, I graduated from high school with honor. In the summer of the same year, my father<sup>22</sup> took me and two of his female cousins of my age to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan to apply to a university. Kyrgyzstan, like many other newly independent republics, had begun to carry out some educational reforms. We did not know before we came to Bishkek which university we would choose. One of the major reforms in the educational system was that students were allowed to apply to more than one department or university at the same time. I applied to two Kyrgyz Philology departments and one Russian language and literature department at two different schools: Kyrgyz State National University, the oldest university in Kyrgyzstan, and the Pedagogical Institute of Russian Language and Literature University (which was going to be renamed as the "University of Languages and Humanities," now called Bishkek University of Humanities). I was lucky to be accepted by all three departments. I chose the newly opened department of Kyrgyz philology at the Pedagogical Institute, because of two Kyrgyz professors who promised a great future for the department and for the

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<sup>22</sup> My father graduated from an Uzbek school in Uzbekistan, but received his higher education in history from the Kyrgyz National University in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan.

announcement at the board of the Kyrgyz Philology department where it was said that the department especially encourages talented students who write poetry, sing, or play traditional instruments. This attracted me and my father because I play the *komuz* and sing traditional Kyrgyz songs. My father and I went to one of the musical instrument shops in Bishkek and he bought me a new *komuz*, which I brought with me to the examination interview. The new chair of the Kyrgyz Philology Department, Sulayman Kayıpov, a leading folklorist who himself plays the *komuz*, gave me an oral exam. While I was preparing for my exam questions in the examination classroom with six other students, Sulayman *agay*<sup>23</sup> entered the classroom and saw my *komuz* on my desk and asked me about my *önör*, that is skill, or talent. By grabbing my *komuz* he said to me with a smile, “Would you like to compete with me in playing *komuz*? I was not shy and I replied back: “I cannot play melodies well, but I can compete with you in a singing contest.” His eyes lit up with surprise and he laughed with happiness. After he gave me my oral exam, Sulayman *agay* told me that he liked my bold answer, and he questioned me as to which other universities I was applying. When I mentioned other departments, he asked me seriously to promise him to choose his department, and we shook hands as an agreement.

Meanwhile, all the parents waited nervously in the hot sun outside the University building for their student-to-be daughters and sons. Those students who passed the exams came out running with bright smiles, holding their piece of paper, whereas those who didn't came out with their heads down crying. As soon as I came out the building, my father knew that I had passed.

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<sup>23</sup> *Agay* is a respected term of address used by students for their male teachers.



I lived in the University's dormitory with girls who came from other rural areas of the country. Bishkek was a big city for rural girls like us. The first two years of our study coincided with the very harsh economic crisis which hit not only Kyrgyzstan but all of the newly independent post-Soviet republics. All of a sudden, the shelves of the city's grocery stores became empty, and we were left with only bread and tea. Sometimes, the stores ran out of bread too. The monthly student stipends were not given to the students on time. During the winter of 1992, the newly independent government of Kyrgyzstan faced its worst economic crisis. It could not feed its students, especially those from the countryside living in the dorms, and it asked the parents and the local state farms and village administrations in the countryside to bring humanitarian aid in food supplies to their own students studying in the cities. Each *rayon*, or regional administration, brought truck loads of food supplies, including meat, flour, sugar, cooking oil, rice, potatoes, carrots, and so on, and distributed it to the starving students on major streets and near the dormitories. In addition, many students received special food packages from their parents. My grandparents sent me *sürsügön et*, dried salty meat, *chabatī*, (very thin, flat bread baked in the sides of a *kazan*, a cast iron cauldron), *sarī may*, yellow clarified butter, and my favorite snack *kurut*, which is small dried balls of sour curd made in the mountains from whole milk. *Kurut* kept me and my friends full because it is very nutritious. Like our nomadic ancestors, we crumbled pieces of *chabatī* bread into our bowls, added three or four balls of *kurut*, and poured boiling water over them, so they would disintegrate. In this way, we survived the economic hardships of the post-Soviet collapse in the early 1990s.

In the winter of 1994, the president of the Bishkek University of the Humanities, Kadıralı Konkobayev, who is himself a Turkologist, announced that there was going to be a possibility for a student to go to the United States to study. We were not told any details about which university in the United States, and what the requirements and eligibilities would be. One day, when I was sitting in one of my seminar classes, the chair of our department, Sulayman *agay*, opened the door and asked the teacher whether I could be excused for a moment. I went out of my class and greeted Sulayman *agay*, who told me that the rector, head of the University, wanted to talk to me. On our way to the rector's office, Sulayman *agay* surprised me, asking a very unexpected question, "Would you like to go to America?" I thought he was joking. When we entered the rector's office, the rector asked me the same question again. My immediate reaction was "İi, sizge," "I can't believe it!" When they assured me that they had chosen me, I said: "But I'm not qualified to go!" I was thinking that I do not know English well, but most importantly, it was unimaginable at that time for students from the countryside or for children of ordinary families to go abroad to study. Kadıralı *agay* then explained about the new exchange agreement that they had signed between our University and the University of Washington in Seattle. I was told that Professor Ilse Cirtautas, one of the leading western Turkologists, had initiated this exchange program during her visit to Bishkek. Professor Cirtautas wanted a student who had good grades, who spoke Kyrgyz, and who could represent Kyrgyz culture. In other words, she did not want a Russified Kyrgyz student. My rector asked me to write a short biographic essay about myself and send it to Prof. Cirtautas. In my essay, I talked about my family background, hobbies and interests, and most importantly, my singing and playing the *komuz*. Not long after that I heard the good

news that I had been accepted into the University of Washington. Stunned by this unbelievable opportunity, I rushed to the central telephone to call my parents. I remember standing in the telephone booth and telling to my father that I was going to America. My father remained silent for a moment and said “Are you really sure?!” After the spring semester, I went back home. My parents gave a farewell offering for me by killing a sheep, and invited all our relatives and neighbors. Everyone was very happy and proud of me, but at the same time, they were worried about the fact that I was going to a very far away place where I did not know anyone. My mother was a bit hesitant, but the fact that I was going to stay with Professor Cirtautas gave her peace of mind. Thus, on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1994, together with Kyrgyz elderly gentleman whose daughter was teaching Kyrgyz at the Central Asian Language and Culture Summer Program at the University of Washington, I flew to Moscow with Aeroflot Airlines. In Moscow’s Sheremet’evo-2 International airport, I met a Kazakh girl who was going to Seattle on a similar exchange program between her university in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, and the University of Washington.

When we got into the biggest Russian airplane, the IL-86, I was very scared and began missing home already and cried. The elderly Kyrgyz gentleman, who sat behind me, comforted me by saying that I should not cry, but be very happy to have this unique opportunity which many other students do not have. Thus, we arrived in Seattle in the evening time and we were met by Gülnara Jamasheva, the daughter of the elderly man. We approached the city’s downtown with its high-rise buildings and lit-up skyscrapers while riding in a big car (I think it was an older version of a Cadillac), and I felt as if I was in an American movie. All the houses in the residential streets looked like those in

fairy tales. The Kazakh girl, Ainura, and I were brought to Professor Cirtautas' apartment around 10:00pm. She was already waiting for us outside the building. Ainura had already met her when she was in Almaty, whereas I was meeting her for the first time. She was very happy to see us and greeted us in Kazakh and hugged both of us. Prof. Cirtautas told us that one of us would be sleeping in the neighboring apartment next to her own, and one of us would sleep in her apartment. Since Ainura knew her personally, she went to her place. Now I was left alone in a strange apartment to spend my first night in America. I could not fall asleep for a long time. The next day we told Prof. Cirtautas that we want to stay in the same apartment. She told us that it had only one bed. When we said that the bed was big enough to fit both of us, she smiled and said, "Alright." We did not know people did not share bed with another person in America. Another mistake we made was sometimes that we would walk arm in arm. Seeing us once, another Kazakh student, who knew American culture better than us, warned us that we should never hold each other's hands because people would think we are lesbians. I heard this word for the first time in America.

My first impression of the University of Washington's campus was the most memorable. It was summer time, so everywhere was green and clean. Squirrels were running all over the place. The city's cool air reminded me of the summer pastures in Kyrgyzstan. The architecture of the University buildings gave the image of medieval times in Europe. In short, I fell in love with the city's beautiful nature and the people who were very polite and always ready to help.

We were introduced to American students who were enrolled in the Central Asian Language and Culture Summer Program. They were interested in knowing about us and

about our culture. Ainura and I had brought with us our national instruments, the Kazakh *dombra*, and the Kyrgyz *komuz*. Ainura and I performed for the students and at other cultural events on campus many times. I was quite proud to be the first Kyrgyz to introduce American audiences in Seattle to recitations from the *Manas*, the Kyrgyz national epic.

Except those students and professors interested in Central Asia, people in Seattle did not know about Kyrgyzstan. They always confused it with Kurdistan, even though such a country does not exist. I gave many formal and informal presentations about Kyrgyzstan, and musical performances of Kyrgyz traditional music, and people in Seattle called me a cultural ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to the USA.

Unlike my Kazakh friend Ainura, who spoke a little bit of English, I knew almost no English when I came to the University of Washington. According to the University's requirement, both of us enrolled in the ESL classes on campus in addition to the other courses required of undergraduate students. It was very challenging and difficult to switch to a different educational system and academic learning style. Most importantly, writing papers was the most difficult task for us. However, we were very fortunate to have Professor Cirtautas and other American friends who helped us with our papers. The teachers of our ESL and English composition classes were also understanding, and kind enough to give us some extra time to write our critical papers in English. Writing papers was quite challenging for both of us because we were not taught in Soviet schools to think critically or to analyze literary and scholarly works.

At the beginning of the academic year, towards the end of September, a group of other Kazakh students, funded by the Kazakh President's national program called

*Bolashak* (Future), came to the University of Washington. These seven students stayed in the University's dormitories. We usually hung out together. All of the Kazakh students, with the exception of two, spoke in Russian because they were from Almaty and had gone to Russian schools.

After studying for a year at University, there was another chance given for those who wished to stay and had good grades for a second year. My Kazakh friend, Ainura, however, decided to return home because she was very homesick. I was also homesick, and I cried a lot because I could not talk to my parents who lived in a town where one could not call directly. But I knew that it was my only chance and it would be very unwise to let this second opportunity go. After the end of the Central Asian Language and Culture Summer Program, where I assisted Prof. Cirtautas in teaching Kyrgyz, I was able to visit home for about a month and a half. Everyone at home asked me why I became very skinny and pale. I said that I was homesick a lot and there was not much sunshine in Seattle.

I received both of my BA (1996) and MA (1998) degrees from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at University of Washington. Upon receiving my M.A, my parents, professors, and friends all encouraged me to apply to the doctoral program, and I did.

Between 1994 and 1998, I was able to visit home three times in late summer. During my third visit home in 1998, I got engaged, as the Americans say, to my "high school sweetheart" in the traditional way (there were exchange of gifts between the future in-laws; the groom's mother brought golden earrings and put them on my ears) and the next year, when I returned home after defending my Ph.D. candidacy, we got married and

had a unique traditional wedding.<sup>24</sup> In 1999, we newlyweds returned to Seattle to finish my Ph.D.

### Ethnographic Research Experience in My Hometown.

In the summer of 2002, my husband and I left for our hometown Kizil-Jar in southern Kyrgyzstan. This was my fifth visit home and my longest stay since 1994, the year in which I first came to the United States. All of my previous stays in Kyrgyzstan during summer breaks were usually not longer than a month and a half.

I received a small fellowship from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization for my 18 months of fieldwork. The Open Society Institute, Soros Foundation, paid my round trip travel expenses between Seattle and Bishkek. Since I conducted my research in my hometown, I did not need much financial support to pay for my living expenses. When my husband and I left Seattle in June of 2002 for Kyrgyzstan, I was seven months pregnant with my son, Erbol, to whom I gave birth in Bishkek on September 29th.

Since this was my first visit home after I got married, my status as a young married woman or *kelin*, brought changes and adaptations in my personal identity and in my relationships with my own parents, and my husband's parents.

The major change during this visit was that as a married woman, according to Kyrgyz tradition, I had to stay in my husband's parent's house. Although I knew and understood my traditional role and status as a married woman, I was not very happy

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<sup>24</sup> See my wedding description on the Silk Road Seattle website.  
<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/culture/wedding/wedding.html>

about the fact that I had to pass by my own parent's house, where I always came during my previous home visits as a single girl. My parents, siblings, and relatives also felt awkward because they were used to receiving me in their home, where they normally made a *kuday* offering for my safe homecoming, by killing a sheep or goat. Instead, my husband's family offered us a *kuday*, to which they had invited their own relatives and neighbors. After two days I visited my parents' house. My parents too offered *kuday*, and I met my own relatives and neighbors.

In September I gave birth to my son in Bishkek. Then the four of us, my mother, my husband, baby Erbol, and myself, who had now acquired another new status of being a mother, were happy to return to our hometown.

During my stay and research in my hometown, I had several duties as a native of that town. From the day of my arrival in my hometown until my departure, I mostly conformed to local traditions and customs as is expected of a married woman and daughter-in-law. My personal experiences and interactions with my family, relatives and townspeople in general, enriched my life by filling the socio-cultural and spiritual emptiness or void that was created in the far away and foreign culture of the United States. Secondly, my longer stay gave fruitful results and deepened my knowledge about my own people and culture. I developed more appreciation and respect for many traditional values and customs, and most importantly, for the everyday regular human interactions which are vital in leading a healthy, happy, full and complete life. At the same time, however, my position and status as a scholar/anthropologist required me to make certain exceptions or "excuses" in terms of my personal relationship with people and in behavioral manners in order to accomplish my academic tasks. For example, I



stayed with my husband and son in my mother-in-law's three bedroom room house. My *kayin ene*, mother in-law and my *kayin eje*, my husband's older sister, who was divorced and had a 12 years old son, stayed in another small one bedroom house in the same courtyard. My *kayin ini*, my husband's younger brother, who was 25 years old and single at that time, shared the three bedroom house with us. According to Central Asian culture, as the youngest son in the family, he inherits his parent's house. As family members, we did not pay rent, but always contributed to the family's economic needs. In addition, we "funded" all the socio-cultural events and traditional customs that took place in our house, the most major event being the memorial feast for my father-in-law who had died in 1991 from lung cancer [This is discussed more in detail in Chapter 5]. Although my mother-in-law is a very kind, soft, compassionate, and understanding woman, I felt uncomfortable asking her permission if I wanted to visit my parents, who lived about two and half miles away. Since I had lived by myself in the States for ten years, I was used to making independent decisions about my personal life and my visits to people.

As a married woman, I experienced another interesting aspect of Kyrgyz traditional culture. One time, I, quite naively, cried when my own father jokingly gave his fatherly advice when I visited them: "It is not nice of you to visit your parent's house so often after you got married. *Chikkan kiz chiyden tishkari*, he said to me, "a Daughter who has left her house (by marrying) stays away (from her family business.)" My mother would say to me, also jokingly, the Kyrgyz proverb, every time I came home: "Törkünü jakindin töshögü jiyilbayt," "The bed of a woman whose *törkün*<sup>25</sup> lives close by is never folded up," i.e., she takes off to visit her own parents (in the morning) without putting her

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<sup>25</sup> *Törkün* denotes a married woman's own parents, relatives and her tribe in general.

bed away. Of course, my parents also wanted to see me every day, because they had not seen me for three years after I got married, but they also respected traditional values and rules of marriage and they did not want to hurt my mother-in-law's feelings.

I could not start my research seriously until my son was about 4-5 months old. He was a very active and restless child who used to cry a lot for no reason until he was able to see things clearly and thus be distracted. Although I did not start my structured or formal interviewing of people until the late winter of 2003, we, i.e., my husband and his family, were busy organizing traditional feast/offerings and visiting other relatives' feasts, offerings, and weddings. As a respected member of the town community as well as of my own and my husband's tribes, I experienced a unique participant-observation position during those traditional feasts, weddings, and other sociocultural events. Most of the funerals and memorial feasts and other traditional feasts were held by my own as well as by my husband's family and relatives. My position and identity towards people in my hometown was diverse. My popular and key identity for my townsmen was Elmira, our girl, who studies in America. Everyone was happy to see and meet me as well as my husband and talk about America and Americans. My second identity was in relation to my tribesmen: for them I was Elmira, their Ogotur (my tribal name) girl/daughter. To my husband's tribe, I was their American *kelin*, daughter-in-law. For my restless and energetic son, I was simply a mom, his source of food. For my classmates, I was that Elmira, their *classkom*, class leader, who studied well, and was the last girl in the class to get married.<sup>26</sup> For my schoolteachers, I was their best student, who made it all the way to America, and they were very proud of me. Last but not least, in addition to all these

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<sup>26</sup> Most of my classmates had married early and already had at least two or three children.

different identities and positions that I held, I was a native, a female scholar, who, unlike during her previous home visits had now come with a clear scholarly goal of doing “fieldwork” among her own people and the culture of which she was an integral part.

All of these regulations me in a unique and advantageous position to learn and study my own society and culture from within, and to represent it to an English speaking audience. I knew the ins and outs of the town and the surrounding villages, and had close personal relationships with most of the people whom I interviewed. The oral history of my own relatives, both patrilineal and matrilineal tribesmen, alone provided me with a significant amount of valuable information to help me understand the issues and questions under study. I had easy access to culturally sacred and sensitive gatherings such as funerals and memorial feasts (See Chapter 5).

Unlike many foreign fieldworkers, my “field site” and “informants” were not strange or new to me. The first essential tool that a foreign fieldworker needs to bring to another culture is the knowledge of the local language. I had the advantage of knowing both Kyrgyz, which is my native language, and Uzbek, which is closely related to Kyrgyz.. Moreover, I did not have to begin my research by learning about my culture from scratch, as in the case in the traditional practice of anthropological fieldwork where a brave imperial person sails off to an unknown place. My main scholarly goal and approach was to update my existing knowledge of my own native culture and to try to analyze and interpret current socio-cultural and religious issues and developments that were taking place in the society.

I did not face any difficulties in gaining people’s trust and permission to be interviewed or to participate in other families’ special events, or to take pictures and

videotape them. My relatives and townsmen, whom I interviewed, did not quite understand the necessity of the consent forms, which I brought with me for them to sign. These forms created an official and artificial barrier between me and the people, with whom I had a close and trustworthy relationship. Many did not care about the forms and simply signed them without reading them.

My first experience of participant observation in fieldwork was the traditional *beshik toy*, also known as *jeentek*<sup>27</sup> *toy*, cradle feast, which we offered for our one month old son Erbol in my mother's in-law's house. Traditional wooden cradles are still used in Central Asia, especially in the countryside. According to this custom, it is the maternal grandparents of the baby who bring the new cradle for their daughter's first child.<sup>28</sup> We killed a big sheep on the day of the feast and invited my parents and relatives, and my husband's relatives and neighbors. My mother and three other respected female relatives came with a new cradle for Erbol. My mother bought the colorfully painted frame of the cradle from Uzbek merchants on the other side of the border and made all the mats, pillows, and other covering blankets herself. The cradle had a protective charm and some hanging toys. The main traditional dish which the baby's maternal grandmother brings is called *talkan*, sweetened powdered corn, which is eaten with clarified yellow butter. In addition to the cradle and the *talkan*, my mother brought the cooked/boiled meat of a whole sheep. I captured the essential parts of this old tradition on a videotape. Another old custom relating to a child's growing up was my son's *tushoo kesüü toy*, a feast for cutting the strings which are tied onto the legs of a baby who is just learning to walk.

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<sup>27</sup> *Jeentek* is a Turkic kinship term referring to the children of a female relative.

<sup>28</sup> Only the first child in the family, whether it is a boy or girl, receives the cradle. The following children use the same cradle, which is durable enough to last for two generations.

This custom is still alive among the Kyrgyz, who believe that cutting a child's *tushoo* helps the child to walk smoothly and run fast without stumbling. People comment on children or even older people who keep falling down, tripping, and stumbling, as to whether or not his or her *tushoo* was cut.

As a married woman in another tribe/clan, I had to integrate into the tribesmen relatives of my husband through special customs, in order to establish a new relationship with them. I could not visit my husband's married older brothers as well as other close relatives' homes without their special invitation called *otko chakiruu*, inviting into one's hearth. The terms depend on who is talking – the host or the guest. According to a Kyrgyz nomadic tradition called *otko kirüü*,<sup>29</sup> entering the hearth for the new bride, I was officially invited into his home by my *kayin aga*,<sup>30</sup> my husband's oldest brother, who is married and has five children. This custom requires the host to kill a sheep and prepare a special *dastorkon*, a traditional tablecloth filled with various foods, sweets, and fruits, and to give gifts to me of clothes. After this symbolic establishment of relationship, I could visit their home any time.

Thus, my diverse statuses and identities in my hometown required me to carry out a variety of specific duties and responsibilities. This position made me a passive observer.

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<sup>29</sup> The reason this custom is called *otko kirüü* is because in the past, when entering the yurt, the new bride threw a small piece of fat or butter onto the fire as an offering as well as a symbol of their relationship being good and prosperous.

<sup>30</sup> One of the first and most important rules of etiquette for the new bride is the tradition of *tergöö*, not calling her in-laws and the siblings of her husband by their names. This important custom is still followed in many Kyrgyz families and helps to establish respect and balance between the newcomer and the accepting family. The daughter-in-law can use nicknames for them or simply use traditional kin terms, but she can never pronounce their true names.

I actively participated in various important aspects of my relatives', in-law's and tribesmen's social gatherings, which mostly involved traditional customs and rituals. I was the key player or guest of honor at many events.

One of the main sacred duties of my husband and I, as adult Kyrgyz Muslims, was to pay visits to the homes of all our deceased relatives, friends, and teachers who had passed away while we were in the United States. It was important to visit their relatives and children as soon as possible after arriving home and to make *bata* [fr. Ar. "fatiha" the first surah in Quran] by reciting from the Quran in their remembrance.

The nature and goal of my final fieldwork visit varied in several ways from my previous homecomings or visits. First, I had to adapt myself to a new home and establish new relationships with my in-laws as a daughter in-law. Second, I was experiencing the joy and challenges of being a mother for the first time, and my foremost responsibility was taking care of my son. Unlike my previous very short stays in the summer time, for the first time in ten years I got to spend all four seasons of the year, because I stayed for eighteen months in Kyrgyzstan. This longer stay enabled me to satisfy my deep homesickness and to visit the summer pastures where I grew up as a child, in addition to other regions of Kyrgyzstan. I was able to observe all the socio-economic and religious changes and developments in the town and in the country in general. This time, however, I observed and listened with wide-open eyes and ears or "with spy glasses," as they say, and captured many special events and gatherings on video camera and with photographs. However, unlike foreign fieldworkers, who try to pay attention to and take notes on everything they see, I concentrated on major new socio-cultural and religious developments. In many situations and occasions, I could not separate myself from my

own society and culture. As a native researcher, it was difficult for me to keep my own feelings and views on certain socio-cultural and religious issues to myself. On the other hand, people wanted to hear what I had to say as an educated young Kyrgyz who had seen the world. Therefore, I often found myself engaging in lively dialogues and discussions with my relatives, neighbors, friends, and townsmen, and thus putting myself in an influential position by expressing my judgments and personal feelings about particular subjects. The clearest example of that was the heated discussions, at the fortieth day after death memorial feast for my late grandfather, between two local members of the Islamic fundamentalist group Hizb-ut-Tahrir and my uncles and cousins, on the so called “pure” form of Islam and Kyrgyz Islam. These “Hizbut” men, who have very narrow religious viewpoints, were trying to brainwash the other local Kyrgyz men and women who, by the way, also consider themselves good Muslims, but only know and practice the Kyrgyz form or version of Islam. One of the “Hizbut” men was my own paternal uncle, who had joined the fundamentalist Islamic group in the mid-1990’s when he was still living in Uzbekistan. I, having the personal background described earlier, could not tolerate these men’s outright condemnation of all Kyrgyz, whom they accuse of having un-Islamic beliefs and practices, particularly in relation to funerals and their associated nomadic customs. As is true with many other religious fanatics or missionaries, they were very eloquent and articulate in their religious preaching and speech, which had the dangerous power to influence the minds and lives of the locals, especially the youth, who are an easy target. My other relatives and uncles, who have a basic secondary school education combined with very little knowledge of orthodox Islam and Kyrgyz pre-Islamic religious history, were not in a position to argue with these

religious men, who used very elaborate and smart answers to every question and comment other people posed. Although I respect all religions, including Islam, as a knowledgeable person of my own culture and history, I did not buy their intolerant views on un-Islamic elements of Kyrgyz Islam. Unable to withstand their condemnations and intolerance of many tolerant Kyrgyz customs and traditional values, I stepped out of the yurt in which the women were sitting, joined the men's discussion outside the yurt, and began arguing with them based on my own knowledge of the Kyrgyz religious worldview and values. In mentioning this, I would like to emphasize the fact that it is difficult to observe or listen to such critical discussions passively, especially when you know the language and possess deep cultural and historical knowledge on the subject. As I said, during such discussions, my townsmen and relatives expected a lot from me, as an educated or knowledgeable person, to counter argue the "Hizbut" claims.

When all variables are considered, I believe that my rich and unique personal experience as a native researcher puts me in a much more advantageous position than non-native fieldworkers, and gives me greater confidence and authority to represent and interpret many key aspects of Kyrgyz culture and society. I do not draw my conclusions and interpretations solely from one and a half years of fieldwork experience, but rather from my entire life experience as a Kyrgyz. I am a member of my own Kyrgyz family and society, I cannot exclude my life experiences from my research. My entire life before coming to America was centered around family, tribal and social community interactions, gatherings and traditional feasts, in the mountains as well as in my hometown in southern Kyrgyzstan. I grew up interacting with many people on a daily basis, where I listened to people's talks and discussions on many socio-cultural and family issues. As the Kyrgyz



say, *Adam, adam menen adam bolot*, “A person isn’t a person without other people.” My three younger brothers, and my sister and I grew up listening to such traditional teachings, which helped us to develop essential respectful socializing skills and manners with other people, especially when interacting with elders and receiving and treating guests. In short, my family and kinsmen, with deep traditional nomadic socio-cultural values, played an important role in my attempts to become a good human being. Being a good human being requires many qualities, such as generosity, kindness, unselfishness, and great hospitality. In fact, I do not hesitate a bit in making the following assertion: excluding minor exceptions, Kyrgyz traditional culture is a culture of deep hospitality rooted in the nomadic past. Many foreigners who come to Central Asia enjoy the hospitality of the local people and say that they are very hospitable. Sometimes, some are annoyed about some of the hospitality treatments which make them feel pressured. But anyone who studies deeply, by analyzing and interpreting all the meanings that lie behind this important aspect of Kyrgyz culture, will see that it embodies many other important human qualities and values such as tolerance, that is, accepting and respecting all guests, even enemies, without regard to their racial, ethnic, gender, and religious backgrounds. (See Chapter 3).

Although, I spent almost ten years of my early adult life acquiring academic training in the West, in the United States, I do not consider myself to be a “hybrid” or “halfie” anthropologist. I knew that the educational opportunities and the quality of academic education and training in the U.S. were better than in the Soviet system, and for that reason I wanted to pursue my academic goal all the way to the end. Finally, although I do not blame American and western culture, even after ten or twelve years I still cannot

fully adapt myself to the lifestyle and culture. And I firmly believe that my deep roots in my own culture prevented me from marrying someone outside of my own culture and staying in the United States. Yes, I do not deny the fact that I adopted many western or American habits or manners, but they constitute very small amount of my true self or identity. This is not, however, contrary to my earlier statement that identity, like culture, is not static or fixed in time and space. My more than ten years of western socio-cultural and academic experience are part of my current identity, but they are built on top of my very firmly established Kyrgyz+Ogotur identity, which is rooted in nomadic culture. Above all, the only person who knows best who I am and how I feel about my own self or identity is myself.

I grew up listening to and playing Kyrgyz music on the *komuz*, a three stringed instrument. In my family, it is mostly men who play the *komuz*. My father, grandfather, paternal great grandfather, and great uncles all played or still play tunes on the *komuz*, but they did not sing. My grandfather always took his *komuz* with him to the *jayloo*, and he used to play, usually in the evenings, in the yurt. He loved to listen on the radio to Kyrgyz *akins*, oral improvising poets, and in particular, to the *aytish*, a traditional singing contest between two poets who challenge each other in improvising poems while keeping alliteration and rhyme, which are characteristic of Kyrgyz and Kazakh oral poetry. As a little girl, I loved to sing. My parents and grandparents and all the other relatives who grew up with me often recall how I never stopped singing and dancing. They say “Bassang, tursang irdap ele jürchüsüng,” “You would sing all the time, whether you were walking or sitting.”

I really became interested in playing the *komuz* in 1991, when I was studying in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and I owe my final and strong inspiration to one of the well-known Kyrgyz male singers, Jolboldu Alibayev. He is the man who reintroduced some old, forgotten poems of some of the great Kyrgyz oral poets such as Jengijok, who composed many philosophical songs about life, nature, and old and young age. After Kyrgyzstan became independent, influenced by the cultural and national revival in the country, Jolboldu Alibayev gave new life to one of Jengijok's popular lament poems called "Balam jok," "I have no child (son)." Alibayev composed a very pleasant melody which perfectly matched the content of the song, was very well received by the people, and was constantly broadcast on national TV and radio. In "Balam jok," the poet Jengijok laments the fact that he is getting too old to have children and he has no son/heir to leave behind him, but the way he expresses his lament is very touching and powerful and filled with many traditional expressions and parallelisms. It was this particular poem that inspired me to learn the *komuz* and sing *dastans*, traditional poems. Thus, at the age of sixteen, I quickly learned to play the *komuz* on my own in order to sing "Balam Jok." My paternal step great-grandmother, Rapia used to cry when I would sing this song, because she had no children of her own. I received many blessings from elderly Kyrgyz every time I sang this and other *dastans* composed by well-known Kyrgyz oral poets. It was my *komuz* and my passion for Kyrgyz music that helped me to earn recognition in my hometown and at my University in Bishkek, and that finally brought me to the United States. My father continues to remind me that I should keep singing, because many people can achieve in academics, but few can achieve in academics and in singing with an instrument. If I measure my identity based on Joldasbekov's statement, then I am a "true Kyrgyz,"

because I feel like crying when I listen to good Kyrgyz traditional music and songs such as Jengijok's "Balam Jok."

In conclusion, I want to cite a very strong but valid statement made by the well-known senior Kazakh scholar, Mīrzatay Joldasbekov. I will never forget this statement, which I heard through another Kazakh scholar, Ashirbek Muminov, because his words touched my heart deeply, and also confirmed to me my personal identity as Kyrgyz. According to Mīrzatay Joldasbekov: "A Kazakh who does not cry when hearing a [traditional] Kazakh music/song is not a true Kazakh." If I measure my identity based on Joldasbekov's statement, then I am a "true Kyrgyz," because I feel like crying when I listen to good Kyrgyz traditional music and songs such as Jengijok's "Balam Jok."

Thus, my Kyrgyz identity, which is deeply engrained in nomadic culture, affects what I write and how I write about the Kyrgyz culture. Like many other Kyrgyz who grew up in the mountains, I feel strongly about the legacy of this centuries old nomadic life because I learned many valuable life lessons such as respect for nature and animals and respect for the elderly and one's parents. Most importantly, the ecological, economic, and social demands of nomadic life prevented the strict gender division like in traditional sedentary cultures. Even though the Kyrgyz nomadic life was based on tribal or patriarchal society, women always played an important role in making family decisions and running the household. As the Kyrgyz say "Katīn jakshī er jakshī," "Behind a good husband stands a wise wife." Kyrgyz believe that everything, such as hospitality, children's upbringing, and husband's status among his and his wife's kinsmen depends on the character of the wife. Therefore, when a Kyrgyz man searches for a good wife, he should also consider her tribal background. They say, "Our daughter in-law is 'tektüü

jerdin kızı,” i.e., “from a good tribal background” or “Tektüü jerden kız al,” “Marry a girl from a good tribal background.” This gives a great honor for the woman because she represents not just herself, but her entire kinsmen/clan, with whom she had a long and very close interaction. No one wants to hear a curse “Urugung soolgur!” “May your entire clan/tribe dry up/perish!”

The wisdom of nomadic culture is not just reflected in epic songs and poetry, but in everyday life relationships. Like many young Kyrgyz, I grew up hearing many *alkish* or *bata*, blessings of the elderly and my grandparents. Western scholars like Privratsky are mistaken to assert “Kazakh has no other vocabulary for hello and thank you.”<sup>31</sup> In Central Asian culture, the word “Thank you” is expressed in the form of a blessing by the elders. The term *Rahmat* (Ar. “mercy”) which is widely used in Central Asia is a loan word from Arabic. I rarely heard elderly Kyrgyz saying *Rahmat*. Every time when a young boy or girl pours water onto the hands of the elderly or guests before the meal, he or she receives wonderful blessings such as *Kuday jalgasın!* “May God bless you!” *Ömürüng uzun, örüşhüng jayık bolsun!* “May your life be long and your summer pasture be wide!” *Kem bolbo!* “Don’t ever lack anything!” *Baktıluu bol!* “May you be happy [in marriage]!” *Chong jigit bol!* “May you grow up to be a big and strong man!” *Tilegen tileginge jet!* “May you reach your goals!” In other words, as another Kyrgyz saying states *Bata [or alkish] menen er/el kögöröt, jamgır menen jer kögöröt,* ““Blessings make a man grow, rain makes the earth grow (become green).”

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<sup>31</sup> Privratsky, Bruce G. *Muslim Turkistan. Kazakh Religion and Collective Memory*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001, pp. 97- 98.

## Chapter II: The Town of Kizil-Jar: The Main Research Site

### Ethnic and Tribal Composition

The town of Kizil-Jar was my main research site where I gathered most of my ethnographic material for my work. Therefore, it is necessary to provide background information about the ethnic and tribal compositions, geography, and the socio-economic history of the town.

Kizil-Jar's dominant ethnic group is Kyrgyz. Of a population of 16,000, approximately 90% are ethnic Kyrgyz, the rest are ethnic Uzbeks and Uighurs. After the Soviet collapse, by mid 1990's most of the "minority groups" (they were not considered minorities during Soviet period) such as Russians, Koreans, and Tatars left Kizil-Jar.

Almost all the Kyrgyz people living in the town belong to the main *uruu*, tribe, called Saruu, which is divided into many *uruks*, clans. The major clans within Saruu in Kizil-Jar are Ogotur (Hunter), Besh Kaman (Five Boars), Kirkuul (Forty Sons), Barki, Machak/Keldey, Bagish (Moose), Chargana, Kurkuroo, etc. Although most of the Kyrgyz of Kizil-Jar knew about their clan and tribal name during the Soviet period, their interest in their tribal genealogy grew stronger after Kyrgyzstan became independent. Writing the genealogy and history of all Kyrgyz tribes became a national task. In the countryside, *aksakals*, white bearded men and intellectuals from respected tribal groups began telling about their tribal genealogy and history and publishing small booklets about them. In 1995, when I was returning to the University of Washington in Seattle, my father gave me a manuscript of our own clan genealogy, which he had recorded from my great grandfather and other elders from our *uruk*. My father asked me to type the manuscript on

the computer and to make many copies in a small booklet form. I brought back with me over two hundred copies of the genealogy booklet which, my father then distributed to most of the members of our *uruk*. Our relatives were all eager to receive a copy and happy to see the names of their ancestors, their own and their children. I should mention the fact that the genealogy includes only males' names, because the nomadic Kyrgyz were a patriarchal society.

Knowing the names of one's seven forefathers was the tradition among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs. Since they did not have a well-established written history, their oral history was their *sanjira*, which comes from a Persian word for tree. *Sanjira* was usually told by elderly men and oral poets and epic singers who were able to store hundreds of personal, tribal and clan names as well as historical events in their minds. In the past, when two Kyrgyz met, they immediately inquired about their father's name and the name of their tribe or clan. Those who did not know their ancestors were called *teksiz* or *kul*, rootless or slave. One of the reasons for knowing one's tribal genealogy was to avoid marriage within one's own clan or cousin marriage. Kyrgyz and Kazakhs still follow the tradition of not marrying someone of the same tribe/clan after seven generations pass.

In Kizil-Jar, these various *uruks* of the Saruu tribe live side by side with each other. Although, originally, when they were brought down from mountainous regions by the Soviets, they became settled in the same street or neighborhood. Most of my Ogotur relatives, for example, live in the small village Jilkool, which used to be their winter place. The majority of the Besh Kaman *uruk* live on the Mailuu-Say Street. People from different *uruks* intermarry, helping at and participating in each other's feasts, funerals,

and other special gatherings. However, when one of the members of a particular clan is in “trouble”, e.g., in big financial debt or cannot afford to kill a horse for his diseased parents, it is people of the same clan who offer help. (These issues will be discussed more in detail in Chapter 4).

Table 1: Statistical Information about Kizil-Jar<sup>32</sup>

Number of households	3016	Town hospital	1
Number of people	14703	Feldsher	2
Women	7481	Middle schools	5 (6)
Men	7222	Kindergartens	1
Retired people	1312	Public bathhouses and saunas	3
Welfare receivers	590	Private bathhouses	55
Pre-School Children	1859	Water pipelines	26 km
School aged children	4190	Culture House	1
Eligible workers	7205	Libraries	1
WWII veterans	7	Communication Service	1
Participants of the Afghan War	19	Drugstores	3
Victims of the Chernobyl Tragedy	3	Bazaar	1
Complete Orphans	12	Milestones	9
Disabled people	218	Household service shops	2
Old people with no relatives	15		

### Short History of the Town

Kizil-Jar was and still is one of the well known agriculturally developed former *sovkhozes*, state farms in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>33</sup> The town lies in the western edge of the Ferghana Valley, which is considered to be “the heart of Central Asia.”<sup>34</sup>

Due to the Soviet ethno-territorial division of the Central Asian region in the 1920’s, the Valley still remains artificially divided between the three Central Asian republics,

<sup>32</sup> I took this information in 2003 from the large information billboard hanging at the entrance of the town’s main park. But the information shows earlier numbers.

<sup>33</sup> I gathered material on the history of my hometown from the town’s (formerly *sovkhoz*’s) former and current directors and as well as from local elderly and teachers.

<sup>34</sup> Rashid, Ahmed. *Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 18.



Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The Ferghana Valley is the most densely populated and fertile region of Central Asia with ten million inhabitants, the main ethnic groups being the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz. The Ferghana Valley, especially its bazaars, was also the place for centuries old nomad-sedentary interaction between various Kyrgyz nomadic tribal groups, who lived and raised livestock in the Tian-Shan Mountains, and Uzbek-Tajik sedentary townsmen and farmers who made the best use of the Valley's fertile land by growing agricultural products.

Three out of the seven provinces of Kyrgyzstan are located in the Ferghana Valley. They are Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken, all sharing quite complex Soviet-drawn boundaries with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The town of Kizil-Jar (also known as Uch-Korgon) is part of the Aksı *rayon* of the province of Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan. To the east, Kizil-Jar borders with the Namangan Province of Uzbekistan. The major river Narın, which originates in the northwestern part of Kyrgyzstan, flows by the east side of the town serving as a natural as well as an official boundary between the Kyrgyz town and Uzbekistan.

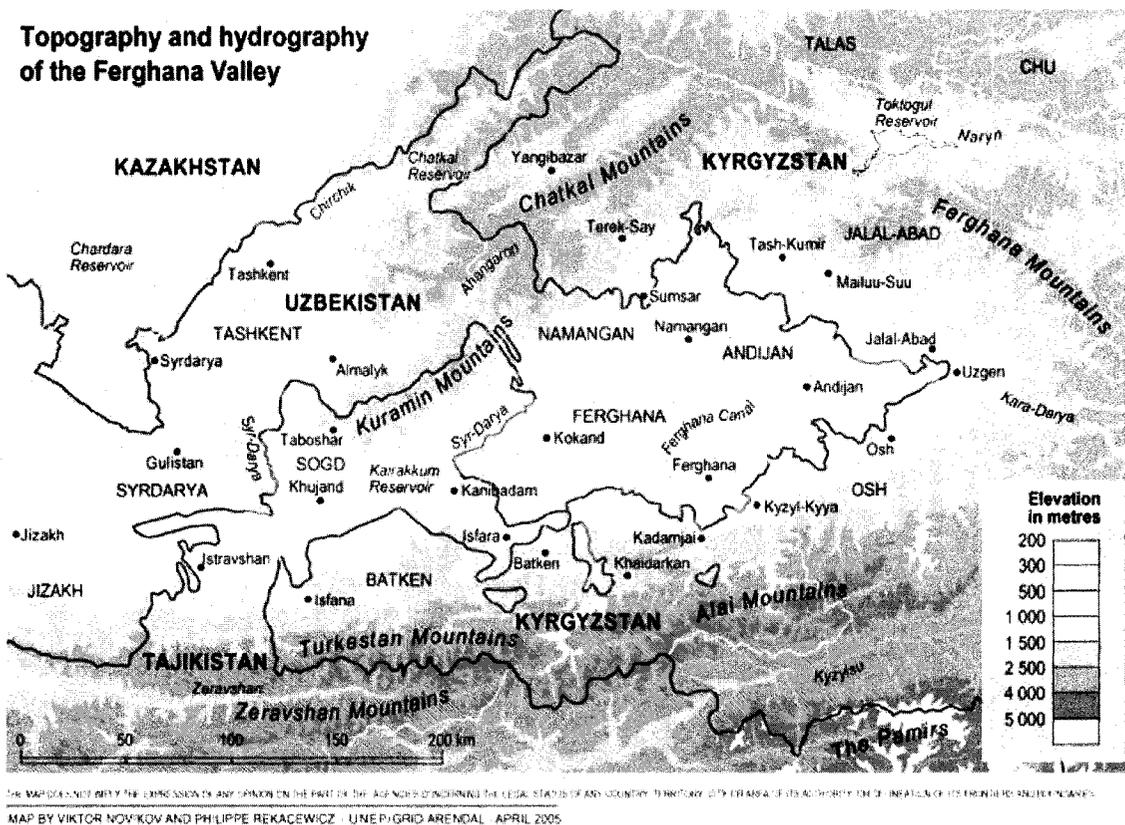


Figure 11: Map of the Ferghana Valley; Source: United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)



Figure 12: Map of Kyrgyzstan; Source: Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection

Before I start talking about my hometown Kızıl-Jar, it is important to discuss the significance of this southern region of Aksı and its inhabitants. Unlike the Kyrgyz living in the other southern provinces of Osh and Batken, which have large Uzbek populations, the people of Aksı speak “standard” or “literary” Kyrgyz with a slight accent similar to the Talas dialect in northern Kyrgyzstan. One of the major tribes of Kyrgyz called Saruu inhabits the region. The Aksı region is blessed with many beautiful mountain pastures such as Kashka-Suu, Cheer, Chatkal, Bozpu, İspı, Kichak-Jol, and lakes and rivers like Sarı-Chelek, Kashka-Suu and Itagar. It has been a home for many talented Kyrgyz oral poets and *komuchus*, komuz players such as Jengijok and Niyazaalı. Aksı partly owes its fame to the famous oral poet Jengijok (1860-1918) who composed the oral poems titled “The Sooru (the best part) of the Earth is Aksı Indeed!” and “Let Me Tell About My Land, Aksı” in which he praises the Saruu and Kıtay tribes and the beauty of the mountain pastures they inhabit. He uses a very poetic and rhythmic language, following the strict initial and internal alliteration, characteristic of Kyrgyz oral poetry. The following excerpts from his first poem help us to picture Aksı and also tell us why this region is special:

Aksı is aBlessed Land, indeed!<sup>35</sup>

I have my Saruu and Kıtay people [in Aksı],  
I have precious words like yellow gold  
Which make me sing when I desire.  
I have reason for concern,  
Who can sing with such passion  
The song left from my heart

.....  
Let me tell you a bit about  
My Aksı, the Polar Star,

---

<sup>35</sup> *Jengijok. İrlar.* (Jengijok. Poems) Frunze: “Kırgızstan”, 1982, pp. 38-52.

If I haven't forgotten.  
 What a wonderful place Baldırkan is!  
 So, Ötö,<sup>36</sup> describe it all from head to toe.  
 Its *bayterek*s swing in the wind,  
 Its birds chirp and sing,  
 Its upper reaches are all cool pastures.

.....

Springs flow from the mountains  
 Pure and tasty like honey.

Its rivers flow swiftly in ravines  
 Turning to a silvery color  
 It tastes like honey to drink,  
 Your heart gains strength.  
 The cuckoo birds fly around anxiously  
 Unable to find their loved ones.  
 Brown bears lumber across the hillsides  
 As if searching for something.  
 As soon as the sun gets hot  
 The cubs swim in the water,  
 They threaten with their strength  
 The animals less strong than they.  
 (He describes the trees and grass)

.....

A traveler can scarcely find  
 His way out of its forests.  
 He can't find his way home;  
 Walnut trees block his path.  
 If a horse comes too weak to walk  
 It'll grow its mane in just seven days.  
 Grapes, apples, and pears  
 These fruits are found by the hundred.  
 The best part of the Earth is Aksı,  
 Whoever lives here feels content.  
 Alma-Konush and Kız-Korgon  
 Have always been destined  
 For my Kyrgyz with the white *kalpak*.  
 Glaciers remain all year around,  
 Winters get very cold.  
 Its cliffs reflect the sun,  
 And are covered all over with ice.  
 As if a beautiful girl has embroidered,  
 As if a master had specially built them,

---

<sup>36</sup> Ötö was Jengijok's real first name, but he became famous with the nickname name Jengijok which means "one without sleeves," i.e., the poet used to roll up his sleeves before playing his *komuz*.

You might say he made them perfectly.  
 Its slopes are covered with birch and pine,  
 If you look closely,  
 You'll see red apples and black cherries.  
 Snow leopards play chasing one another,  
 While eaglets preen in their aeries.  
 The caves resound  
 Echoing the human voice.

.....

Ashuu-Tör and Ak-Taylak  
 Are the pearls of the Earth,  
 People disperse at the height of summer,  
 They make *ayran* and *koumiss* flow,  
 Sunny side is filled with blackberries

.....

They pitch six hundred yurts  
 For *ash* at which I sing,  
 They drive the mares to be milked  
 On the hills and valleys of feather grass.  
 A person's heart will open  
 When the perfumed breeze  
 Kisses your face.  
 The place called Oy-Alma is our pasture,  
 Where many people settle in summer time.  
 Come with the people who live there  
 See it for yourself and be satisfied.

.....

(Then he talks about how young women play all kinds of  
 traditional games such as *ak chölmök*, which is played under the  
 moon light and play in the swing)

Twin baby deer play on the cliff  
 By butting each other with their antlers,  
 Its spring flowing down the hill  
 Imitates the laughter of girls,

.....

This is the land where  
 All kinds of animals live  
 These are the famous Saruu people  
 Who've inhabited this place for a long time.. . . .<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> It is a long, but very beautiful poem, in which Jengijok cannot not finish describing the beauty, mainly, all kinds of wild animals, birds, and plants found in the mountains of Aksı. The poem should be read in Kyrgyz in order to feel the beauty of the region as well as the Kyrgyz poetic language.

As we learn from this poem, the mountains and valleys of Aksï were the traditional summer and winter camps of the nomadic Saruu tribe, who are believed to have come to the region from northern Kyrgyzstan during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' Kalmyk invasion. Even though the contemporary members of this tribe have become settled between 1930s and 1950s, people still remember their ancestors' traditional homeland which they refer to it as "ata konush," i.e., ancestral camp. During summer time, some *uruks*,<sup>38</sup> who live in their permanent houses in towns and villages, get together and go to their *ata konush* where they organize a traditional feast/party called *sherine*. They spend their time remembering their ancestors, singing, and enjoying the traditional foods made from sheep and the koumiss.

This mountainous region of Aksï is also a home for many *mazars*, Muslim saints' tombs such as Safed-Bulan, Padisha-Ata, Īman-Ata, and other sacred places like Baybulak-Ata, Shüdögör-Ata etc., which bear historical and contemporary significance. The poet Jengijok also mentions these places in his poem. The existence of these *mazars* tells us a lot about the religious and cultural identity of the Aksï people as well as the long history of Islamization and Sufi influence in the region. (This topic will be discussed in more details in Chapter 4).

The history of the establishment of the town of Kizil-Jar (formerly a sovkhos) is directly connected with the Soviet policy of sedentarization and collectivization of Central Asian nomads like the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmens in the early 1930's. According to local elders, including my grandparents, about fifty years ago, Kizil-Jar used to be a desert-like place where only wild thorny bushes grew and lizards and reptiles

---

<sup>38</sup> The Kyrgyz use two different terms for tribe and clan. The term *uruu* is used for a large tribe, like Saruu, whereas, *uruk* is the name of minor clans within the *uruu*.

crawled. The surrounding hills were the *kishtoos*, winter camping grounds of some of the Saruu Kyrgyz, who traveled with their livestock to *jayloos*, summer pastures in the high mountains of Chatkal, Bozpu, and Ĭspi in early May and returned to their *kishtoos* in Kizil-Jar in late October.

In 1939, by the decree of the Supreme Soviet, the semi-nomadic tribes, who used Kizil-Jar as their winter home, were transferred to the mountainous region of Toktogul, which is located in the center between northern and southern Kyrgyzstan. This historical relocation of nomadic Kyrgyz is known in people's memory as *köchüirmö* (*köch*- "to move," *köchür*- "to make someone move.") The goal of this relocation was to integrate various Kyrgyz nomadic tribes and clans into a new Kyrgyz nation, make them sedentary, establish collective and state farms and teach the nomads agriculture. After moving the people of Kizil-Jar, the Soviet government had planned to move more tribes from the southern regions to Toktogul. However, WWII broke out in 1941 and the sedentarization process ceased temporarily. When the war began, people fled back to Kizil-Jar from Toktogul, but many of them escaped to Uzbekistan fearing that the men would be mobilized into the Soviet Army and be used to do the heavy work behind the front. My own great grandfather Köchümkul was among those men who escaped to Uzbekistan during the war. Many Kyrgyz found refuge in Uzbekistan because there the Soviet government did not have their names officially registered.

He had already established a family in Kizil-Jar and had three young sons before his family and other people were forced to move to Toktogul. Like many other Kyrgyz in Toktogul, my great grandfather had built a mud house and began adjusting to a new sedentary life. He, like many others, left his house and livestock in Toktogul, packed the



necessary belongings and food and fled to Uzbekistan with his three little sons. His wife had passed away in Toktogul and my great grandfather did not want his children to become *tomolok jetims*, i.e, complete orphans, if he went to the War. They traveled on horseback and on ox moving day and night and finally reached an Uzbek village in the Namangan province of Uzbekistan. He and several other Kyrgyz families were hired by the local Uzbek government to take care of the Ghalaba (Victory) collective farm's livestock because the Uzbeks, as farmers, did not know how to raise large numbers of animals such as sheep and mares in the mountains. These Kyrgyz families were quite satisfied with their life among the Uzbeks with whom they became good friends. The main reason for their decision to remain in Uzbekistan was that they were still able to continue their traditional nomadic life in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan (Uzbekistan leased Kyrgyzstan's summer pastures in İspī) and return to their winter place in that Ghalaba kolkhoz.

During Khrushchev's time (1960s) Kizil-Jar was among those "virgin lands" which had to be developed agriculturally. They realized that without building irrigation networks, the area would be impossible for a sedentary settlement and farming. Even though this region had very little to offer in terms of arable land, the Soviets chose this area for strategic as well as economic reasons. They saw a great potential in the river Narin in turning the thousands of hectares of this empty and desert land into one of the most fertile agricultural lands in the Ferghana Valley.

Thus, in 1958, the Soviets built the Uch-Korgon hydroelectric station on the Narin river in Kizil-Jar. Then, in 1962, they established the new Kizil-Jar *sovkhos* by moving all the nomadic tribes from neighboring mountain regions down to the valley. The Saruu

Kyrgyz had no choice but to give up their traditional life style and animal husbandry. In other words, they no longer could travel freely in those beautiful summer pastures, which Jengijok described, as they did before. Permanent mud houses replaced their portable yurts and the new state farm appropriated their livestock. Soviets introduced a specialized animal husbandry, i.e., only certain families were hired by the state to raise one type of animal, i.e., one herder's family took care of mares and another sheep.

According to Bolot Moldoshev, the former director of the Kizil-Jar *sovkhos*, the state farm was formed from the integration of previously existing *kolkhozes*, collective farms, which had been established by the Soviets in the early 1930's in the original summer and winter camps of various Kyrgyz *uruks*. It was, however, very inconvenient for the Soviets to control the nomads and establish Soviet power among the far away mountain Kyrgyz for they moved up and down all the time. They finally decided to unite all these scattered, young and undeveloped small collective farms, which they had named Kirov, Karl Marx, Engels, Stalin, Shopokov (Kyrgyz hero of WWII), Jangi-Talap (New Demand) Kizil-Tuu (Red Flag), Jangi-Jol (New Road), and Communism, and created one large unified *sovkhos*, Soviet farm in this desert like hot valley of Kizil-Jar, located near the major river Narin. A Russian man named Meshkov Nikolay Iosipovich was sent from Karavan (Kerben), capital city of the Aksı rayon, to Kizil-Jar to be the director of the newly established *sovkhos*. He was given the task to work out the general plan of the town's settlement and infrastructure and start developing the virgin lands. Meshkov, who served as the director of the *sovkhos* from 1962 till 1990, played a big role in the socio-economic development of the Kizil-Jar *sovkhos*. He was born in the Chüy Valley of northern Kyrgyzstan and had graduated from the School of Agriculture in Tokmok, near

the city of Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan. He also went to study in Russia at the Agricultural Institute in the city of Voronedj and received a degree in mechanical engineering.

Meshkov worked out a systematic plan of settling the Kyrgyz nomads from different mountain regions in Kizil-Jar. Those who were transferred from the Kirov mountain kolkhoz were settled in one street which they named after their previous kolkhoz, those who came from the Karl Marx *kolkhoz* transferred their *kolkhoz's* name to their new street, and those from Jangi-Talap (New Demand) named their street in Kizil-Jar Jangi-Talap, and those from Communism named their street Communism, etc. Meshkov brought in agricultural technology, including thirty-six bulldozers to develop the virgin lands. Irrigation ditches and canals were dug and water pipelines were laid on to the hilly fields of Jel-Tiybes where about 1000 hectares of land was cultivated. Many Russian specialists such as economists, mechanics, and engineers were brought from Siberia to teach the nomads. Veterinarians and *saanchis*, i.e., “cow milkers” were also brought in together with electrical milking machines. As Bolot Moldoshev and those men who participated in the process noted that the development of the virgin lands in Kizil-Jar lasted for about thirty years (1950-1980). New schools, kindergartens, hospitals, bathhouse, culture house, movie theatre, and shops began to be built. Meshkov, who learned Kyrgyz fluently during his twenty-eight years of work among the Kyrgyz, succeeded quite fast in transforming the deserted Kizil-Jar into one of the highly developed and flourished state farms in the entire Republic. He and his state farm became famous and he was awarded with a gold medal named “Hero of Socialist Labor” from Moscow.

According to local elders, there were less than one hundred households at the time when the state farm was created. Gradually, more people began moving into the territory from other mountainous regions. The first school was established in 1958 when two portable Finnish houses were brought to the village to be used as a school building. There were about one hundred children and two or three teachers when the school began to operate. Later, a Kyrgyz educated man named Baymürzayev Ömürbek, who had first served as the inspector in the Jangī-Jol (New Road) rayon (the former name of the Aksī rayon) was brought to the village's school to serve as its principal.

Each year, the area of farmland grew tremendously as a result of thirty years of non-stop vigorous cultivation. The population grew from about 100 households to 3016 with more and more Kyrgyz becoming settled and taking up farming. Later in mid 1970's when it became difficult to manage the vast territory of the *sovkhos*, they created another four *sovkhozes* and separated them from Kizil-Jar. The current state farms of Ak-Suu, İntimak, Jiyirmanchī, and Tash-Kömür, all belonging to the Aksī rayon, are the off springs of the Kizil-Jar state farm. Today, all of these former *sovkhozes* turned into *diykan charbas*, farmers' cooperatives, which are governed by *ayil ökmötü*, village government.

At the time of the farm's highest peak of development, there were seventeen different ethnic groups living in Kizil-Jar among which the Kyrgyz were the dominant ethnic group, Uzbeks constituting the second. The remaining minorities were the Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Uighurs, Tajiks, Koreans, and Kazakhs. Tatars and Ukrainians were deported to Central Asia by Stalin during WWII. The reason for bringing them to Kizil-Jar was to use their education and professional skills in developing

the new region and to establish the Soviet power there. According to Moldoshev, Meshkov's ethnic background as a Russian was one of the guaranteeing factors for the safety of those new non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups in the farm. With the Soviet government's support, Meshkov built one-story apartments for these new comers who contributed a lot to the farm's development. These seventeen different ethnic groups lived peacefully side-by-side. Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, and Koreans mostly served in the administrative positions of the state farm and worked at the school, hospital, kindergarten, telegraph and telephone, and post office, because they had the professional skills in these areas.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, they left for their original homelands in Russia, Tatarstan, Ukraine, and Korea. They left not because the Kyrgyz told them to leave, but because they now had the choice or freedom to return to their homeland. Many of them invited their Kyrgyz friends and neighbors to their house for a farewell party. With the collapse of the Soviet regime, the structure of the state farm changed. In 1995, Kyrgyzstan introduced a privatization policy by dividing most of the state farm's land among the local people. When the land in Kizil-Jar became privatized and people had to work on their own allotted land, the non-Kyrgyz minorities of the town felt somehow vulnerable because they never worked in the fields like the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

### The Üch-Korgon Bazaar and the Bridge

The town of Kizil-Jar became known partly because of the famous Üch-Korgon (Three Fortresses) bazaar, which existed prior to WWII. As the elders recall, before official establishment of the Kizil Jar *sovkhos*, state farm in 1962, there were only about six Kyrgyz families living in mud houses near the bazaar. Kyrgyz nomads, who came

from the mountains to sell their animals, usually stayed overnight at these houses. Uzbek merchants from the neighboring Namangan and Andijan regions of Uzbekistan came to sell goods to the nomadic Kyrgyz. Thus the nomad-sedentary interaction mostly took place at this bazaar. The space of the current stadium in the town was the original location of the old bazaar, which was filled with open-air tents under which merchants laid out their goods. The bazaar, which had developed later on the other side of the bridge, i.e., in Uzbekistan, did not exist at that time. The bridge of Üch-Korgon, which was built around 1939, also did not exist.

After the Üch-Korgon Bridge (köpürö) was built, until mid 1990's, economic and cultural interaction between two main ethnic groups, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks living in Kizil-Jar and in Uzbekistan increased tremendously. Until the early 1990's, on bazaar days, which was Saturday and Sunday, the bridge would literally get packed with people and all kinds of animals. I remember my experiences on the bridge on bazaar days quite vividly because I was always afraid of falling off the bridge. I never felt safe because of its bad quality. The bridge served people and also animals to be sold at the cattle bazaar in the Uzbek side on the bank of the Narin river. I always tried to stay in the midst of the people holding onto my mother's or father's hands very tightly. My feet, like everybody else's, would bleed or get bruised because of animals' hooves or people's hard shoes, while crossing the bridge. Often young children would cry because they would get squeezed very hardly between the people and animals. There were a lot of pushing and shouting by people and noisy sounds of sheep, cows, and goats. The bridge used to shake when it was jammed with people and cattle. It was really a bizarre bazaar. Nevertheless,

I enjoyed going to the bazaar on Saturdays and seeing many interesting goods and people and eating cotton candies and ice cream.

Despite all of these inconveniences on the bridge, there would be *löliüs*, gypsy women sitting on the very edge pockets of the bridge with their babies and young children begging for money or calling people for fortune reading. Every time I would see them I would be scared for their lives, because it was very easy for them to be pushed off the bridge by the masses of people trying to cross the unsafe bridge eagerly.

During the Soviet period, Kyrgyz used to buy almost all their goods such as household items and fruits and vegetables from the local Uzbek merchants in *narkī bet*, i.e., the other side (of the river or bridge), because things were cheaper in Uzbekistan. There was another cattle bazaar on the Uzbek side and Kyrgyz bought and sold animals there as well and using the same bridge to transport their cattle. The Uch-Korgon bazaar on the Uzbek side was quite famous both in Uzbekistan and in Kyrgyzstan for many merchants and *avtolavkas*, truck stores, from different regions of Uzbekistan would come there and sell all kinds of goods. Many Kyrgyz herders would enjoy pilaf, *mantī*, “steamed buns” and *shashliks* or shish kebabs and drink green tea in Uzbek *chaykhanas*, teahouses and *ashkhanas*, cafeterias. Sometimes, herders, including my uncles, would lose large amounts of money, which they got for the animals, to groups of Uzbek pickpocket who were many and who had their own special techniques to steal money from any place on a person. Kyrgyz herders would usually wrap their money in a white cotton scarf and tie it tightly around their waist. Women usually hid their money inside of their bra or inside their socks or *maasi*, soft leather boots worn by men and women. Kyrgyz and Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan would return from the bazaar with their bags

full of all kinds of goods and fruits and vegetables. Herders would usually take melons and watermelons to their children in the mountains where they didn't have any fresh fruits. In short, the Kyrgyz bought almost everything in Uzbekistan starting from needle and threads, brooms up to their bread. We even used to get our haircut and ice cream in *narkı bet*, the other side. Kyrgyz took their shoes to Uzbek shoe repairers.

We used to go to Uzbekistan to see Soviet parades such as May 9<sup>th</sup>, which was the Victory Day, WWII. Uzbeks were the masters of organizing colorful and elaborate parades. In addition, the Kyrgyz made use of many social services in Uzbekistan. Many Kyrgyz went to see Uzbek doctors and received treatments in Uzbek hospitals, especially for surgery, because we did not have a surgical unit in our local hospital. In short, the neighboring province of Uzbekistan, Namangan was “the source of livelihood” for the Kyrgyz living in Kızıl-Jar and for other Kyrgyz in neighboring villages and towns in the Aksı region.

In mid 1990's, however, that connection was cut off by the Uzbek government, which closed all its borders with Kyrgyzstan to avoid the penetration of Islamic fundamentalist groups from Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the beginning, when the Uzbek government started to introduce strict border controls, they put a military post on the Uzbek end of the bridge. Soldiers guarded the bridge day and night and checked the passports of Kyrgyz citizens when crossing the bridge to go to Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan did not close its borders and Uzbeks were free to travel in Kyrgyzstan. All other roads going to Uzbekistan from Kyrgyzstan by car were shut down and the bridge was the only way of communication for the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks living on both sides of the river. Kyrgyz were not allowed to buy goods and food products from Uzbekistan in large



quantities. If they did, the soldiers did not let them pass the bridge until they bribed them. The Kyrgyz currency had and still has higher value than Uzbek sum. The closure of its borders and shutting down of the Uch-Korgon Bridge by the Uzbek government brought many economic and political problems to many Uzbeks and Kyrgyz living in the area. It created many ethnic tensions between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks who lived quite peacefully side-by-side during the Soviet period. The existing Soviet-made ethno-territorial division between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks became much stronger and clearer after Uzbekistan closed its doors to its Kyrgyz neighbors. Many Uzbek merchants who used to sell goods, fruits and vegetables in Kyrgyz bazaar were almost driven out by local Kyrgyz, who took over their places. Eventually, the Uzbek government completely shut down the bridge by destroying it to the level that no one could cross. Several people, mostly Uzbeks, died accidentally by trying to cross the dangerous bridge which had many large holes and broken parts. People started to hate each other, especially the Kyrgyz, who were very angry at the Uzbek government and also at their own Kyrgyz government for letting the Uzbeks into their country. In 1999, Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan, especially those who lived close to Uzbekistan, were very upset about President Islam Karimov, who had made a negative statement about the Kyrgyz on his Uzbek national TV, which the Kyrgyz still watch. According to people in Kizil-Jar, Karimov complained that the Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan were being fed by Uzbekistan and affecting Uzbekistan's economy. He said that every Kyrgyz coming to the Uzbek side of the border leaves with two *nans*, traditional Uzbek *tandoori* bread, not mentioning other food products.

When Uzbekistan completely shut down the bridge by making it very dangerous to cross, people, both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks began using the other railroad bridge, which is

located about a mile down the river. Uzbeks are always allowed to come to Kyrgyzstan without any problems, whereas, the Kyrgyz are given a hard time to cross to Uzbekistan, especially men. Kyrgyz men usually do not go to Uzbekistan at all because they fear the Uzbek police officers who are believed to work together with thieves and criminals whom they use to take away money from the Kyrgyz men and women as well.

Since the border problems with Uzbekistan, there have been many changes in the life of the Üch-Korgon bazaar. During the Soviet period, only state owned stores were allowed to sell goods in the bazaar. Individual merchants who sold goods and products, which they themselves made, were called *chaykoochu* in Kyrgyz and Uzbek or *spekulant* (speculator) in Russian. Since Uzbeks had a long established history of trade and merchant culture, their selling of *nan*, and other foods like ash/paloo (pilaf), *mantı*, *shashliks*, shish kebabs, and candies, hand made traditional clothes, shoes, and jewelry were somehow tolerated by the Soviet government. However, when some Kyrgyz elderly women tried to sell their hand made *kiyiz*, traditional felts and *shirdak/törböljün*, appliqué felt, on the bazaar, they were immediately outlawed. The former Kyrgyz director of the state farm told me about two cases when some Kyrgyz women tried to sell felts and koumiss, made of cows milk (real koumiss is made from fermented mares milk) at the bazaar, they were called in to the *kontor*, the main administrative building where the director sat, and given a strong warning. One Kyrgyz man was accused of *chaykoochuluk*, i.e., illegal trade and received a two-year sentence in jail for making personal profit by buying animals from the Uzbek cattle bazaar and selling them in the Kyrgyz bazaar or visa versa for a higher price.

Before and during the Soviet period, Kyrgyz mainly sold animals in the bazaar. They did not sell their milk products such as *kurut*, dried sour curd, *suzmö*, thick salted yogurt, cheese, *kaymak*, fresh cream of milk, or *sari may*, clarified butter, because selling “white” food, i.e., made of milk, was considered a bad omen. Also, sitting and selling anything, except animals, at the bazaar was perceived to be a lowly act among the nomadic Kyrgyz. Therefore, it took the Kyrgyz people of Kizil-Jar sometime to adjust to the new market economy. But the market economy, like everywhere in the former Soviet Union, forced many local Kyrgyz, mostly women, to take up commerce, which meant going to the city of Ürümqi in Xinjiang, in northwestern China to buy goods and sell them in local bazaars. The first group of local Kyrgyz and some Uzbek women, who started their own business of bringing goods from China, were former saleswomen who worked at state owned stores in the town. For the first couple of years these women were quite successful with their business, unfortunately, their lives ended tragically on their way back from China. Their bus fell over a cliff killing almost all of the women in it and leaving a few survivors. After that, people stopped going to China from Kizil-Jar and they brought goods from other neighboring main bazaars of Kara-Suu, Osh province, and Bishkek. The market economy created a new group of Kyrgyz *kommersants* out of the former schoolteachers and housewives who had to leave their jobs, which paid very little salary. Eventually, when the number of Kyrgyz *kommersants* began to grow, they literally chased the former Uzbek merchants away from the Üch-Korgon bazaar in Kizil-Jar and took away their spaces to sell their own goods. When Kyrgyz began involving themselves in selling and buying goods, there was a cultural and ethical hesitation in them and in their children and relatives. They and their relatives were embarrassed of

each other in the bazaar, because, as I mentioned earlier, sitting and selling things was a shameful act among the Kyrgyz and also among other nomadic peoples of Central Asia such as Kazakh and Mongols. It definitely has to do with Central Asian nomadic culture and values in general. I remember myself being embarrassed seeing my mother, her friends, many of my former teachers from my high school, mostly women, selling goods in the bazaar, when I first came from the United States to visit my family in my hometown. I tried to avoid passing by the row where my teachers and my mother sat selling their goods. However, I had to greet with my teachers and by doing so, I put them in an uncomfortable situation. They seemed embarrassed to see their student in a bazaar setting.

Today, the Üch-Korgon bazaar, including the cattle bazaar and other stores and restaurants around it are all operated by Kyrgyz only, except the main *chaykhanas* and cafeterias which are rented out for local Uzbek and Uighur families. Bread and *shashlik* are still sold by ethnic Uzbeks and Uighurs, whereas, fruits and vegetables are sold by mainly ethnic Kyrgyz. Well-off Kyrgyz families have privatized most of the buildings and spaces in the bazaar like stores, restaurants, and cattle bazaar. In fact, my husband and I were offered by the director who is in charge of state-owned store buildings, to buy the old building of the local Soviet built *univermag*, which stands for a universal *magazin*, i.e., department store, because she thought that we brought a lot of money from America. She wanted to sell the building for 600.000 *soms*, about \$15.000 U.S. dollars, which we did not have.

Today one can find almost anything in the bazaar. Every time I visit my hometown, I see new things in the bazaar like pool tables and lottery games. I am sure

there will be an Internet café the next time I go. I enjoy going to the bazaar and observing the changes and meeting people. By looking at the quality and prices of goods and products sold there, I measure my townsmen's standard of living and my town's economic development. I have visited my hometown five times since 1994, the year I came to study in the States, and I see a lot of improvements every time and hope for a better future in people's eyes. I also see a big difference in Kyrgyz people's attitude towards commerce. Selling goods is no longer a lowly act, but rather a privileged job. The size of the bazaar is growing every year with more and more Kyrgyz merchants coming from other neighboring towns to sell goods. The cattle bazaar lost its Uzbek customers since the bridge was shut down. Several new cattle bazaars were opened in other Kyrgyz towns bordering Uzbekistan where Uzbeks can cross the border and buy cattle from the Kyrgyz. But they still have to bribe the Uzbek soldiers guarding the border. Livestock business is growing each year, as many Kyrgyz are motivated to raise animals and go to the mountains in the summer time. Recently, local wealthy herdsmen privatized the *koroos*, corals, by the way of auction.

### Cotton Monoculture during the Soviet Period

The Kizil-Jar *sovkhos* was known because it was one of the largest cotton growing state farms in southern Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet period. There were about 4072 hectares of farming land in total, of which, after 1995 privatization, 20860 hectares were distributed to the people and 971 hectares remained in the Ayil ökmöt's (village government) fund. My father had written me a letter on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1995 when I was a first year student at the University of Washington in Seattle. I kept his letter because it is

his first letter to send me by mail from Kyrgyzstan and also, it contains his personal fatherly advice to his daughter studying far away in the United States. It also gives useful information about the land reforms in our state farm during the post-Soviet economic crisis. One can apply those kinds of developments to all of the state and collective farms of Kyrgyzstan at that time. My father starts his letter by greeting me in a “traditional” Kyrgyz fashion (he has a beautiful hand writing by the way) and inquires about my health, studies, and life in America. He asks me to give my regards to my professor and a Kazakh girlfriend from Almaty who came with me. After letting me know about the well being of all our relatives in Kyrgyzstan, he writes the following news about the land reform in our *sovkhos*:

This year’s winter has not been that cold. We had very little snow. According to the government’s land reform policy, the Kizil-Jar state farm is being divided into 10 farmers’ cooperatives (*dïykan charba*) or, in other words, the farm is going from socialism to capitalism. The land, livestock, technology, and buildings are being distributed to the farmers’ cooperatives according to the number of people in them. (Then he lists the names of ten *törö agas*, i.e., leaders of the cooperatives). I joined Rïskulov Ayilchï’s farmers’ cooperative, because the majority of people are joining their own clans (*uruk*). There are 50 families in our cooperative. Half of our relatives in Kürötüp (a small village which also belongs to our state farm) joined Toktomatov Toktogul’s (who is from a different clan, but has the most number of people) cooperative. Moldoshev Bolot ake, (former director of the farm who also served as an *ayil ökmöt*, when the farm was privatized) as the president of the committee on land reform, is dividing all the state properties to the people. The people also have the choice not to join the farmers’ cooperatives, but establish their own individual cooperatives.

As for the news in the political sphere, (I know that you are not that interested in politics, but today, it is almost impossible to live without it, because it is becoming a requirement of our time), on February 5<sup>th</sup>, we will be electing deputies to the Jogorku Kengesh (Supreme Council). There are 1100 candidates for 105 seats. There are 21 candidates from our district for 2 seats. Only two of them will be elected. These candidates and their supporters are agitating people every day.

People's living standards are getting worse every day; salaries, pensions, and welfares are not given on time and food is expensive. For example, a sack of flour costs 120 *soms*, 1 kg of cooking oil is 10 *soms*, 1kg of sugar 8 *soms*, 1kg of meat 10 *soms*, etc. You see this kind of situation not only in Kyrgyzstan, but also in all the republics of the former USSR. I think this is a temporary scene because this should happen when going from one social economic formation to the next. It is my philosophical credo to look at the future optimistically and believe in a better future or as the Kyrgyz say "Jakshī ümüt—jarīm mal" (A good hope equals a half sheep). . . .

After the Soviet collapse, cotton still remains the most profitable crop in the region. In addition to cotton, our farm also used to grow tobacco in 1980's when Kyrgyzstan was ordered to grow tobacco (the prices for tobacco must have gone up). The hot and dry climate of southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly our region, was also best suited for growing tobacco. Individual families, including the families of teachers and doctors and other social workers, were given pieces of land according to the size of their family to grow tobacco in the summer time. Our family grew tobacco in 1980's for five years in a row on fifteen *sotykh* (about 0.5 acre) of land and we all hated it. The cotton and tobacco fields were grown almost next to people's courtyards. Tobacco smelled very bad in the summer time. More than that, it was a very time-consuming work, which required a lot of hands. The planting of the tobacco began in May and harvesting the ripe leaves continued until the end of September. Tobacco leaves had to be picked by hand five to seven times during this period and strung on long strings with sharp iron needles about half a meter long, then these strung leaves had to be hung to be dried on the sun, after they became dry they had to be taken off the strings and sorted according to their quality and moisture, then they had to be taken to the special stations to be pressed by a pressure

machine. All of these works were done in the hot summer time temperature between 38 and 40C of heat.

The neighboring Uzbek provinces of Namangan and Andijan grew mainly cotton. We usually received Uzbek TV channels because of our close location to Uzbekistan. Like in all other republics of the former Soviet Union, Uzbek and Kyrgyz national news mostly talked about the successes of their state and collective farms and praised “the heroes of labor” for their great achievements in carrying out the state plan, mainly in cotton production and animal husbandry. It became popular to set a record on fulfilling the cotton plan and livestock breeding. Most often the numbers were falsified and *chabans*, shepherds, farmers, and *saanchis*, “cow milkers” received medals for getting 190 lambs from 100 sheep or 70 *tsentner* (1 *tsentner* = 45.36 kg) of cotton from 1 hectare of cotton and 500-1000 *tsentner* of beats from 1 hectare.<sup>39</sup> However, this was the indication of economic crisis in Soviet Central Asia. People were forced to fulfill the state plan no matter what and local officials had to falsify numbers.

All people worked from early down till late in the evening during the cotton-picking season. The local middle schools were shut down during the cotton-picking season for the period of three to four months. Most of the free manual labor came from local students of 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grades (11-17ages) who did not go to school for three months and picked the “white gold,” cotton, about 9-10 hours a day and seven days a week . In addition to the local students and teachers, other social workers such as doctors and nurses, salesmen were also mobilized and were given a daily plan to fulfill. Kizil-Jar grew so much cotton that it required the state farm to bring students from other regions of

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<sup>39</sup> Attokurov. S. *Kirgiz etnografiyası. Okuu kurali* (Kyrgyz Ethnography. Textbook). Bishkek, 1998, p. 77.



Kyrgyzstan where cotton was not grown. I remember very well the scenes when those *jardamchis*, (cotton-picking helpers), arrived in long chains of Soviet made *Ikarus* buses. One day, while picking cotton in the field with my classmates, we counted over 150 buses full of *jardamchis*, who arrived to *shiygangs*, their temporary homes in the cotton fields. There came a lot of *jardamchis* that we had to empty our school buildings for them to sleep. After having their breakfast at the *shiygangs* and schools, the *jardamchis* were transported by bus to the cotton fields at around 7:00am. They were given daily quotas to fulfill and their teachers monitored their work. They ate their lunch at noon, then picked cotton again until 6:00-7:00pm and were given dinner. They did not like their meals and would always ask the local students to bring for them home made bread. Every week or two, on Sundays, they were brought to the local bathhouse, which was too small for thousands of people. There was no public toilet in or outside the bathhouse and they used the toilets of the people living near the bathhouse. My family lived very close by the bathhouse at that time and I remember those hilarious times when my younger brother and I guarded (we were 4-5 years old) our toilet from the *jardamchis* because my mother was afraid that they would fill it too quickly.

Unlike the *jardamchis*, who came from other regions and lived in *shiygangs* and school buildings, we, the local students were not given lunch by the state in the fields. Since we lived in our own houses, we brought our own lunch. The local students continued picking cotton after the *jardamchis* left. During some years, when our sovkhov could not carry out the plan, we had to pick every tiny white piece of cotton from the ground as well as from the cotton plants. One year, I must have been a 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grader, we picked cotton until late December when it was snowing. We did not have any gloves

and our hands would turn blue from the cold. We shook the plants to get rid of the snow and pick the cotton. I remember our teacher who sat shivering under the piled up plants. At the end of the cotton harvest, we would receive a very small amount of money for our three months of hard physical work. Sometimes, I think that the state should have given those medals to those students who were deprived of their three-months of education every year to help the farm to fulfill its cotton plan.

Today, Uzbek *mendikers*, laborers, have replaced those Soviet *jardamchis* in Kizil-Jar. Kyrgyz individual farmers and farmers' cooperatives mostly hire Uzbek *mendikers* who come from the neighboring Uzbekistan to Kizil-Jar to earn money by doing all kinds of works. However, they come in large numbers, we are talking about workers between one and two thousand each day, during the cotton-picking season, which begins in the middle of September and lasts till late November. In Kyrgyzstan, since 1995, most of the agricultural land has been given to farmers who are free to grow whatever they want to and sell their crops on the market. However, there is not enough technology to plow the land and pick cotton. The old Soviet tractors and combines of the state farm became too old. Those machines that are still in good shape are divided among major farmers' cooperatives which rent their tractors and plowing machines to individual farmers. Therefore, cotton is entirely picked by hand. Many families pick themselves and those who can afford to hire Uzbek *mendikers*. The former director of the state farm said to me in astonishment: "It is actually possible to harvest hundreds and hundreds of hectares of cotton without mobilizing thousands of local and outside school children. When it comes to one's own private farm, not the state's, people have a strong motivation to work and make money." Or as the Kyrgyz say "when it comes doing someone else's

work, one finds many excuses, but when it comes to one's own work, one has the strength of an ox" During the cotton-picking season, the main street leading to the Uch-Korgon bazaar turns into a "mendiker bazaar" where Uzbek laborers, mostly women and children, wait eagerly early in the morning for their Kyrgyz "customers," who take them to the cotton fields by buses, cars, tractors, and Soviet made Ural motorcycles. The *mendikers* bargain with their customers about the price for one kilo of cotton. Last year when I was there, the price per kilo of cotton was one *som*, which equaled 24 Uzbek sums. *Mendikers* picked between 50 and 100 kilos of cotton a day. They said that the Kyrgyz money they earned in one day would be sufficient to feed their family for at least a week. Unfortunately, they have to bribe their own Uzbek soldiers at the railroad military post on their way home. In short, Uzbek people's life in the countryside is a lot harder economically for they still work for their state, which gives them very little money. Unlike Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan does not have enough land to distribute to its population. Uzbek women, who stayed in our house and helped us to pick cotton, complained about their difficult life in Uzbekistan, but they were afraid to criticize their government and their leader, President Islom Karimov. They said the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz living in Kizil-Jar are very lucky to own land. However, they said, the Kyrgyz are lazy and they waste a lot of land by leaving them empty. They said to my mother in-law that she could become a rich woman if she took care of her *ogorod*, a Russian word for a land in one's courtyard, and used every inch of it by growing fruits and vegetables and selling them in the bazaar.

## Schools

As for the education level of the local population, almost everyone can read and write in Cyrillic. There is a generation of old people like my great grandparents and grandparents and great uncles who became literate during 1930's in the Latin alphabet. In 1960's, if there was only one small school, today there are six middle schools (middle school is combined with an elementary school) in Kizil-Jar. In 1998, when I visited my hometown, I, together with many other people who graduated from the school, named after the Russian poet Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, was invited to the celebration of our school's 40th anniversary. The town and the school administration used that occasion to change the school's name Pushkin to Nikolay Iosipovich Meshkov, the first Russian director of the state farm, to honor his life long service in the town's socio-economic development. The Pushkin school was the only middle school which had Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian language classes. Russian, Tatar, and Korean students studied in Russian language classes, whereas, Uzbeks studied in their own native Uzbek language. Today, Uzbek children in Kyrgyzstan still continue to study in Cyrillic alphabet, despite the fact that Latin alphabet was introduced in Uzbekistan's schools in mid 1990s. It is said that Uzbek students graduating from Uzbek schools in Kyrgyzstan are not that welcomed in Uzbek institutes of higher learning. Therefore, some Uzbek children in Kizil-Jar switched to Kyrgyz language classes hoping to get accepted into Kyrgyz vocational schools and universities. What alphabet do they use for Kyrgyz? In the past, some Kyrgyz children also studied in Russian language classes to get a better education and jobs later. The Russian language and literature subjects in Kyrgyz classes were taught by Russian and Tatar teachers, many of whom left after the Soviet collapse. The kindergarten also had a

lot of Russian and Tatar staff members. Its director was a Russian woman, Alla Servgeevna, who was a tall woman with short red hair, red cheeks, and strict demeanor.

With Kyrgyzstan's declaration of independence, more emphasis was given to the Kyrgyz language and national culture, especially in schools. After the Soviet Union fell apart, due to the decrease in number of Russians, Tatars and Ukrainians, the school had to close its Russian language classes. Uzbek groups lasted longer, but they were also shut down for about two years and reopened again later. We had many Uzbeks and Tatar neighbors, who, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, left for their titular countries. Uzbeks' leaving of Kizil-Jar for Uzbekistan was mainly due to the ethnic clash between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz which took place in the city of Osh in summer of 1990. Although there was no hostility towards Uzbeks in Kizil-Jar, they felt insecure and decided to emigrate. Later, after seeing the poor economic conditions in Uzbekistan, those Uzbeks who left returned to Kizil-Jar where they received a piece of land to grow whatever they wanted.

## Medical Care

The first hospital in Kizil-Jar was built in 1960's and it was a long, one-story building. After the construction of a new three-story hospital next to it, the old buildings became privatized and given to people who were on the government's waiting list to receive free housing. During the Soviet period and until the Uzbek border shut down in mid 1990s, many Kyrgyz and Uzbeks living in Kizil-Jar used the hospitals of neighboring Uzbekistan, because the local hospital did not have major medical services such as surgery, trauma, urology, and optical care. Besides, the biggest hospital in Karavan,

capital city of the Aksı rayon of Kyrgyzstan, was forty miles away from the town. The main hospital of the Üch-Korgon rayon of Uzbekistan was right on the other side of the border. People just had to cross the bridge to go there. Uzbek doctors often received Kyrgyz patients without a *napravlenie*, i.e., medical referral because they were happy to get some gifts and money.

When the Soviet Union fell apart, medical care has suffered the most in Kyrgyzstan. Many hospitals were left without any medical supplies and medical staff, who quit their job and went to sell goods in the market. During the economic crisis in the early 1990's, there were a lot of shortages of drugs and medical equipment. The head doctors of hospitals, who are in charge of humanitarian aid given to their hospital, sold most of the free medicine to other people who sell medicine in the bazaar.

In recent years, Kyrgyzstan began introducing reforms in its medical system. These reforms are based on the United States' medical system. They couldn't pick a worse one. Medical insurance and family doctors are two main reforms are being carried out. Patients must now pay for their in-patient services including the medication they receive from the doctors. Since people do not have insurance, many of them cannot afford to pay their medical bills. Retired people usually get some discounts through their welfare card called OMS, Social Medical Insurance. However, basic medical services like general check ups, giving birth, etc. are still free of charge or have small fees, but I am sure that in near future people will have to pay for these services as well. When I was there, several physicians from our local hospital attended series of special seminars on family doctors, which were funded by USAID. These seminars were offered in the city of Jalal-Abad and selected doctors from all over the province were invited and given

stipends during their study. After the end of each seminar (which lasted for a month), doctors had to take exams and those who passed received a certificate, which qualified them as family doctors. My aunt Sırğa, who is the main pediatrician in our local hospital, also participated in that program and became a certified family doctor. She said that it would take them and the people some time to adjust to the new Medical care, which is expensive and different from the old Soviet medical care, which was free.

In sum, Kizil-Jar has a very interesting socio-economic history. It was one of the main centers of nomadic and sedentary interaction in Central Asia. Its hills were originally the winter camping ground of the Saruu Kyrgyz who, during the summer time, moved from pasture to pasture with their livestock. The Uzbeks lived on the other side of the Narın river and engaged in agriculture and trade for many centuries. Before the Soviets built the Uch-Korgon Hydro Electric Station (GES) on the Narın river in 1958, no agriculture was developed on the Kyrgyz side of the river. After building the GES in the region, Soviets brought down all the clans (uruks) of Saruu Kyrgyz from the mountains in the Aksı region to the Valley and organized into small collective farms. During the Soviet period it developed into one of the most economically developed state farms in Kyrgyzstan. Schools and other necessary social services were built to educate the children of the local Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.

### Chapter III:

## Dynamics of Identity Formation among the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks: Legacies of Nomadic-Sedentary Differences

### Introduction

Having provided the above information about the ethnic composition and the socio-economic history of the town of Kizil-Jar, we can now talk about the dynamics and processes of identity formation in the formerly nomadic Kyrgyz and sedentary Uzbek societies, who are the main ethnic groups living the Ferghana Valley. We need to ask: What role did historical nomad and sedentary interaction play in creating and fostering ethnic boundaries between the two peoples? What were and are some of the main socio-cultural and psychological factors that kept and still keep the two ethnic groups apart? Are these factors indeed a side effect of their pre-Soviet religious and socio-cultural values and traditions, which are in turn rooted in the two distinct lifestyles they led in the past? Or is this division the legacy of the seventy-year rule of the Soviet system, which is said to have artificially created heterogeneous nation states out of the homogeneous region called Turkistan by granting each ethnic group a separate national territory, identity, literary language/alphabet, national dress, and national elite? Or could this ethno-cultural division be the legacy of both pre-Soviet, historical nomadic-sedentary interaction and the Soviet political system? Even though the Soviet indigenization policy played a major role in dividing ethnic groups, I argue that prior to Soviet territorialization and indigenization, an “unofficial” ethno-cultural division existed on a local or popular level between the nomadic Kyrgyz (or tribal groups) and sedentary Uzbeks/Sarts.



As a result of Soviet nationality policy in the 1920's, today there exist clearly marked nation states such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, etc., and clearly demarcated ethno-national groups, such as the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Uzbeks. In contrast to simple-minded interpretations of ethnicity as a totally modern phenomenon, in fact there have been cultural, ecological, and political boundaries between sedentary and nomadic Turks for a long time; the modern process of ethno genesis has to be understood as starting from a situation in which there were already boundaries and those boundaries were further strengthened by Soviet indigenization policy which granted titular ethnic groups a separate national territory, alphabet, school system, and language by codifying the Turkic dialects into separate languages. Despite the fact that various Turkic speaking peoples of Central Asia share a common history, culture, and root language, people living in each independent republic today are very self-conscious about their national identity as Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Tajiks.

Soviet nationality policy played a key role in hardening the national/ethnic identities among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. The creation of national or ethnic identity is a result of the official indigenization policies of larger multi-ethnic states or empires such as the Soviet Union and China. Both of them had and still have many minority ethnic groups living in their territory. It is usually the titular nation that tries to legitimize its power over the rest by presenting itself as an "elder brother." For example, together with many other minority ethnic groups living in the People's Republic of China, the Inner Mongols have been the subjects of the Chinese official policy of

*minzification*.<sup>40</sup> According to Almaz Khan, China portrays herself as a modern and highly civilized Han-Chinese nation. Almaz Khan also maintains that national identity as a Mongol previously was not that important, but it was revived after the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's. It is argued that political events during the Cultural Revolution resulted in the emergence of national or ethnic Inner Mongol identity *vis-à-vis* the Han-Chinese.<sup>41</sup>

### Nomadic-Sedentary Interaction in Eurasia

Historically, the region of Eurasia was the homeland of various Turkic and Mongol peoples and their states and empires. Since the ancient times of nomad-sedentary interaction in Eurasia, the Turco-Mongol nomads have played a vital role in the socio-economic and political history of that part of the world. Eurasian nomadic empires and peoples have not lived in isolation, but have interacted with the sedentary world for thousands of years. As a result of their close interactions, they adopted or integrated into their own cultures different religious beliefs and practices of sedentary cultures and religions such as Buddhism, Nestorian-Christianity, Manicheism, and Islam. Moreover, merchants and travelers from East and West traveled along the Silk Road, going through the vast territories of Eurasia inhabited by the Turco-Mongol nomadic peoples. This resulted in trade and cultural exchanges between sedentary and nomadic worlds. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional pastoral nomadism and these powerful nomadic empires -- which existed for more than two thousand years -- were gone. After the Soviet

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<sup>40</sup> Han Almaz X., *Split Identities: Making Minzu/Ethnic Subjects in Inner Mongolia, People's Republic of China* (Doctoral Dissertation). University of Washington, 1999.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-5.

occupation of Central Asia, the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz had no choice but to leave their *jayloos* (pasturelands), give up their livestock, become settled, and integrate into sedentary Russian/Soviet culture; however, the historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural interactions between the two worlds left unique socio-cultural legacies among the Central Asian Turkic nomads, especially among the Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz.

Despite their different socio-economic organizations and lifestyles, sedentary and nomadic, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz share a common Turkic language, pre-Islamic and Islamic religious beliefs and practices, and sedentary/agricultural life. Historical socio-economic lifestyle divisions between the nomadic Kyrgyz and sedentary Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley have vanished. All rural Kyrgyz, except some herder families, live a sedentary life in permanent brick and mud houses all year round, and largely practice agriculture like the Uzbeks. But despite their common linguistic, historical, and cultural heritage, both ethnic groups demonstrate strong sentiments of separate self and national identity. For various reasons, which I explore in my research, the two peoples have certain “prejudices” towards each other’s socio-cultural values, such that intermarriage between the two groups rarely takes place. The Kyrgyz consider it almost a disgrace if a Kyrgyz girl marries an Uzbek man and many Uzbeks feel the same about a Kyrgyz man or an Uzbek girl.

The 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Orkhon-Turkic inscriptions written on stones in Old Turkic are the best proof for the above argument. Bilge Qagan, ruler of the Turkic Empire, which existed between 552-744 A.D in Inner Asia, erected an eternal stone honoring his brother Kultegin Qagan. The Kultegin inscription, which reflects the style of an oral traditional epic, is full of patriotic feelings. Bilge Qagan is desperate to save his people

and empire from the Chinese with whom they closely interacted. Since the text of the inscription is too long to cite here, I will select only those passages which reflect the “nationalistic” sentiments of Bilge Qagan towards his “Türk people.” On the south side of the stone, he begins his words by addressing his brothers, sons, family, people, nobles and military commanders, and asks them to listen to his words carefully. Then he talks about his campaigns against other people and places by naming all the geographical names. He gives messages and advice to his Turk people. Among all the places, Bilge *qagan* singles out the Ötiken Mountain-Forest from where he ruled his Empire, and he warns his people not to go far from the Ötügen Mountain-Forest, lest be destroyed by their enemies:

The words of the Chinese people are sweet and the silk of the Chinese people is soft. They attract remote peoples, luring them with sweet words and soft silk. When the Chinese have settled remote peoples nearby, they devise schemes to create discontent there. Good wise men and good brave men are prevented from moving about freely. If a man turns against them, they show no mercy towards his family, his people nor even towards babies in the cradle. In this way, enticed by the sweet words and the soft silk of the Chinese, many of you Turk people have perished. . . . .<sup>42</sup>

This message of Bilge Qagan clearly demonstrates the fact the Türk people had already developed their “national” self-consciousness in the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Bilge Qagan has a clear idea about the mentality or character of the Chinese people, who were sedentary. He definitely knew and his Türk people probably also knew about the territorial and cultural boundaries that existed between the Turks and the Chinese.

On the east side of the memorial stone, Bilge Qagan talks about his ancestors, Bumin Qagan and Istemi Qagan, who created the Turk Empire and codified its traditional

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<sup>42</sup> “The Kul Tigin Inscription,” translated by Oztopchu Kurutulush and Sherry Smith-Williams. In: *Anthology of Turkish Literature*. Edited by Kemal Silay. Bloomington, Indiana: Turkish Studies and Ministry of Culture of Joint Series XV, 1996, p. 2.

laws. He very much regrets the fact that after the death of his ancestors, many Türk nobles were deceived by the Chinese:

Their sons, destined to be nobles, became slaves of the Chinese, and their daughters, destined to become ladies, became chattels of the Chinese people. The Turk nobles gave up their Turk titles and, inclining toward the Chinese, took Chinese titles, became subjects of the Chinese *qagan*, and gave him their service for fifty years. . . .<sup>43</sup>

Thus all the Turk common folk said: "We were a people with an enemy of our own; where is our enemy now?" "For whom are we conquering these lands?" they said. "We were people with a *qagan* of our own; where is our *qagan* now?" "To what *qagan* are we giving our service?" they said. . . .

Then the Turk Heaven above and the Turk Holy Earth and Water acted in this way: So that the Turk people would not perish, so that the Turk people would be united, the gods on high elevated my father Ilterish *qagan* and my mother Ilbilge *qatun*. Thereupon my father the *qagan* set out with seventeen men. . . .<sup>44</sup>

"We settled the Turk people and organized them in the west as far as the Kengu Tarman. At that time, slaves became the owners of slaves and chattel became owners of chattels. That was how our empire was won and our tribal laws reestablished. . . .<sup>45</sup>

So that the name and reputation of the people whom our father and uncle had conquered would not cease to exist, and for the sake of our Turk people, I spent nights without sleeping and days without resting. . . .<sup>46</sup>

These eloquent words of a Turk *qagan* from the 8<sup>th</sup> century reflect strong self-conscious nationalistic feelings about the Turk people. As mentioned earlier, it is quite possible that the Chinese accepted those Turks -- who, as Bilge Qagan mentions, learned Chinese ideograms -- into their community without feeling that they were nationally distinct. However, it is clear that the Turks felt strongly about who they were and how important it was for them to keep their identity separate from the Chinese people for the above reasons that Bilge Qagan mentions.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

## “The Nomadic Factor” in Kyrgyz Identity

I believe that originally, the Kyrgyz--or the Eurasian nomads in general -- did not call themselves “nomads,” nor describe their lifestyle and culture as being “nomadic,” since the *boz üy*, yurt,<sup>47</sup> was both their permanent and portable dwelling, whereas the mountains and pastures were their homeland. They have the word “köch,” which, as a verb means to “to move” and as a noun means “migration.” However, there is no native Kyrgyz/Turkic word for “nomad.” It is most likely that it was their sedentary neighbors the Persians, Tajiks and later Uzbeks who created the second noun, “nomad” by adding the Persian suffix “man” to the Kyrgyz noun “köch.” So, together “kochman” (“köchmön” in Kyrgyz, “köshpendi” in Kazakh) means a “nomad.” I believe that once the Kyrgyz became fully sedentary, they started to use the word *köchmön*, meaning both nomad and nomadic to refer to their traditional culture and lifestyle. Upon adopting a sedentary life, they estranged the nomadic life from themselves and started to look at their past history and life style from a sedentary point of view. Russians used the native Turkic word “köch” and added the Russian suffixes “evnik” and “voy” to make it into a noun and adjective forms: “kochevnik” for nomad and “kochevoy” for nomadic.

Another interesting point to be made is about the connection between modern Kyrgyz identity and their nomadic past. For instance, even though the majority of Kyrgyz living in the countryside--including my hometown of Kizil-Jar--have been living a sedentary life for more than a half-century, they live sedentary in form (i.e., they live in

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<sup>47</sup> Westerners, including Russians, use a misinformed term for the dwelling of the Central Asian nomads. Yurt is a Turkic word which means the homeland, as well as the trace of ground where the “yurt” is erected. Central Asian nomads--including Mongols, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tuvans and Turkmens--all have different names for their yurt. The Kyrgyz call it *boz üy* (gray house), gray referring to the color of the felt covering. The Mongols call it a “ger” which closely relates to the Kyrgyz word “kerege” i.e., the collapsible wooden frame of the yurt.

permanent houses and practice agriculture), but nomadic in content (they practice and cherish nomadic customs and values in their family and social relationships, feasting, cooking, and eating). Most interestingly, in identifying themselves or in creating their image as Kyrgyz, the neighboring Uzbeks and their sedentary culture used to play and still do play an important role. In other words, “ethnic identity has a great deal to do with the way peoples adapt, especially to their socio-political environment, that is, to other peoples.”<sup>48</sup>

We know from historical nomad-sedentary interaction in Eurasia that nomads traditionally looked down on sedentary peoples and their cultures, and in the same way sedentary people looked down on nomadic peoples. The popular saying among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz “Özbek öz agam, sart sadagam,” “An Uzbek is my own brother/kinsman, but a Sart is just my pocket change” attests to the fact that the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz made a distinction between Uzbeks, who were nomads originally, and Sarts, who were the original inhabitants of Central Asia and they primarily engaged in farming and trading. Later, when all Uzbeks adopted sedentary life and Islamic culture, intermarried with the local Sart/Tajik population and engaged themselves in farming and trading, the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, who were still leading their nomadic life, began identifying them as Sarts. Today, the term Sart carries derogatory connotation and it is very offensive to call Uzbeks Sart.

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<sup>48</sup> Lehman, F. K. “Who Are the Karen, and If So, Why? Karen Ethnohistory and a Formal Theory of Ethnicity,” In: *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma*. Edited by Charles Keyes, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979, p. 215.

In his book titled *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China*,<sup>49</sup> Thomas Barfield writes about the historical interaction between various nomadic Turkic/Mongol empires and sedentary Chinese dynasties. He questions why the Turko-Mongol nomadic peoples interacted with the Chinese agrarian state for more than two thousand years and yet did not become politically incorporated by it nor adopt its culture.<sup>50</sup> Barfield discusses some fundamental issues of the socio-political relationship between various Turko/Mongol nomadic empires of the steppe and different Chinese imperial dynasties, and identifies some of the major causes underlying the Chinese/nomadic conflict, which lasted for more than two millennia. Confucian scholars wrote mainly negative things about the nomads, whom they viewed as uncivilized barbarians. The relationship between the nomadic states and the sedentary Chinese dynasties is illuminated by a Kyrgyz expression which can be used to describe two peoples as “Kaynasa kani koshulbas (el/dushman),” “Even if you boil it, blood (i.e. of enemies/certain people) won’t mix.” Although the saying does not apply directly to the nomadic peoples’ relationship with the Chinese, it gives a clear depiction of the nature of the relationship between these two linguistically and culturally distinct peoples. Barfield also states: “These horse-riding nomads not only rejected Chinese culture and ideology, worse, they obstinately refused to see any value in it except in terms of the material goods the Chinese could offer.”<sup>51</sup>

In *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*,<sup>52</sup> Inner Mongol anthropologist Uradyn Bulag examines the identity and nationalism of contemporary Mongols. He is critical of

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<sup>49</sup> Barfield, Thomas. *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757*. Cambridge, Mass.: B. Blackwell, 1989.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>52</sup> Bulag, Uradyn. *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.



the “nationalism” of Halh [Khalka] Mongols living in Outer Mongolia. During his research in Outer Mongolia in the mid 1990’s, Bulag had a negative experience with his “relatives,” Halh Mongols who did not treat him well because he was from Inner Mongolia where Chinese influence is strong. Although Bulag spoke Mongolian, he was not considered a real Mongol by the Halh Mongols, for he spoke Mongolian with a Chinese accent and had adopted some of the Chinese “mentality” or manners. Also, he doesn’t mention this, but he was there with a Chinese wife. Inner Mongols were believed to have lost their gene pool because they mixed with Chinese. Bulag was accused of being a “half breed” Chinese who does not know real Mongol culture. Bulag tries to understand this quite “arrogant” nature of Mongol identity. He believes it is based on their previous nomadic heritage and their historical interaction with sedentary Chinese peasant culture. The stereotypical Mongol image of a Chinese merchant is a person riding on a small donkey carrying bags. So, the Mongols call the Chinese “sly donkeys,” while the Chinese call the Mongols “stupid cows.” Thus, according to the author, the two peoples’ views are deeply embedded in their modes of production, which played a major role in creating their separate social identities as nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers.

The author also tries to understand the distinct features of two societies by analyzing their attitudes towards food. Since nomadic Mongol’s diet was and still is to a certain extent based on animal husbandry, Mongols value meat and dairy products more than vegetables. Mongols do not want to eat vegetables grown by Chinese farmers who use human excreta as fertilizer. In the Mongol view, human excreta is untouchable and its

use as fertilizer is unimaginable. But as the Mongol's nomadic cultural system is in favor of animal husbandry, they consider dry dung clean and use it as fuel.

Unlike in many other cultures, a meal without meat is hardly considered a meal for the Mongols. The author is right in stating that the non-existence of meat in meals is equated with starvation. Among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz of Central Asia, this notion still persists, but not among the Uzbeks, who consume smaller amounts of meat and have developed various foods made from vegetables only. Bulag gives many more such examples, which Outer Mongols use to distinguish themselves from the Chinese. All of these arguments put the Inner Mongols on a lower level, because they eat Chinese food made from "dirty" pork, and vegetables grown with fertilizers made of human faeces. In sum, the Inner Mongols, including the author himself, who consider Outer Mongolia as their true homeland, are seen by Outer Mongols as the victims of their assimilation with Chinese culture.

Similar stereotypical views are found among the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. In the traditional/nomadic Kyrgyz stereotypical view, sedentary people, who were called *Sarts*, merchants, or townsmen, were characterized as being conservative in terms of male/female relationships, stingy, and sly. In contrast, the Kyrgyz nomads viewed themselves as being open-minded, humble, generous, and hospitable. As is true among the Mongols, the popular derogatory Kyrgyz name--calling for the Uzbeks is "eshek sart," "Donkey Sart," using the animal as an identity marker. As young children, we used to fight with Uzbek children using these words. They would call us, the Kyrgyz, "it kïrgïz," "Dog Kyrgyz." (I don't know why).

The relationship between the contemporary Kyrgyz and Uzbeks is not as hostile as it is between the Mongols and Chinese, because unlike the Mongols and Chinese, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz share many cultural elements, including Turkic language, Islamic faith, and some food traditions and customs. Despite their common Turkic heritage, however, some minor and major differences in their local customs and manners (which I will discuss later in this chapter) serve as separate ethnic identity markers and thus prevent them from intermarrying and crossing each other's ethno-cultural boundaries.

Based on his research among the Karen ethnic group in Burma, Charles Keyes argues that the cultural distinctiveness of an ethnic group is not sufficient for the existence of that group. In the case of the Karen, "structural oppositions" are necessary to maintain ethnic boundaries. Keyes maintains that when/if the structural oppositions between groups are eliminated, the cultural differences between them may disappear by way of assimilation.<sup>53</sup> In Burma, the moving of "hill tribes" such as the Karen down to the lowlands causes a change in their ethnic identity.<sup>54</sup>

In our case, when the nomadic Kyrgyz moved from the mountains down to the lowland Ferghana Valley where the agriculturalist Uzbeks traditionally live, it did not change or eliminate the main socio-cultural, linguistic, biological, and racial factors between the two peoples.

When we study the dynamics of identity formation among the Kyrgyz we need to consider several key factors. Nomadic life and the economic challenges and activities around it shaped people's views in certain ways that were different from those of

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<sup>53</sup> Keyes, F. Charles, Ed., *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma*. Philadelphia: Institute for Study of Human Issues, 1979, pp. 6-7.

<sup>54</sup> Op.cit.

sedentary peoples. Lifestyle and economy were the number one factors that created a value system, set of customs and rituals, and distinct “nomadic” identity for the Kyrgyz. What are these traditional values and set of customs that many Kyrgyz still foster, and what makes them distinct or different from the Uzbeks? We could say that an ecological boundary led to cultural differences, which led to group feelings and group boundaries. But then the Soviet and post-Soviet political and ideological nation-building processes have both transformed and hardened the boundaries. And it remains to be seen whether current globalization will soften them again.

### Uzbeks in the Eyes of the Kyrgyz

Growing up in southern Kyrgyzstan, I experienced both Uzbek and Kyrgyz social life and culture. I was familiar with many of the general views or “stereotypes” about the Uzbeks. During my research, when I interviewed more than thirty Kyrgyz men and women about their views of Uzbek people and their characteristics, I received many general views and stereotypes I knew. For this chapter, I selected only four interesting and representative interviews.

The first group of Kyrgyz men and women whom I interviewed was my paternal relatives. Of all the Kyrgyz living in Kizil-Jar, my paternal<sup>55</sup> grandparents (*chong ata*) and great uncles (*aba*) and aunts (*chong apa*) have the most authentic knowledge about the Uzbeks and their culture. They lived in Uzbekistan among the Uzbeks for more than forty years and interacted with them on a daily basis before moving back to Kizil-Jar,

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<sup>55</sup> Unlike in the West, the Central Asian people make a very clear distinction between their maternal and paternal family members. There are two different sets of kinship terms for maternal and paternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews.

Kyrgyzstan in the mid 1990's. My grandfather Kochkorbay and his two younger brothers, my abas, great uncles Anarbay and Anarkul, all married Kyrgyz wives and had large families: Kochkorbay and Anarbay have 9 and Anarkul 7. All of their children were born and raised in Uzbekistan. I interviewed my now late grandfather Kochkorbay and great uncle Anarbay about how they ended up living in Uzbekistan, their interaction with the Uzbeks, and the socio-cultural differences between them and Uzbeks. Below I will briefly summarize the story of their settlement in an Uzbek village.

In 1939, the Kizil-Jar sel'skii sovet or sel'sovet (village council) was moved to the region of Toktogul. This relocation of the village administration was known as *köchurmö*, relocation. In 1941, when WWII broke out in the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz living in Toktogul did not want to be mobilized to the front lines. So, in 1942, together with other relatives, my great grandfather with his three young sons left their winter house in Toktogul, taking only a sack of wheat flour loaded on an ox, and fled back to Kizil-Jar. At that time my grandfather was a fourteen year-old boy. In 1942, as they recall, there was no one permanently established in Kizil-Jar. Many men had been taken into the Soviet Army and many had fled to neighboring Uzbekistan which was also part of the Soviet Union. So, in September of 1942, my grandfather followed those who had fled to Uzbekistan. Uzbek administrators welcomed Kyrgyz families, for their collective farms needed herders to take care of the farm's livestock and fulfill their meat and wool quotas. My great grandfather and other Kyrgyz herders avoided the Army by working as herders for the Uzbek collective farm. The war years were difficult, and everything that the farm grew--all the agricultural products and meat--had to go to the front. People had very little to eat.

In the summer, all the Kyrgyz families took the farm's livestock to the mountain pastures, and in late autumn they returned to their winter places in various Uzbek villages. They continued to stay in Uzbekistan after the War. Their children went to Uzbek schools. However, they did not assimilate to the Uzbek language or culture. Kyrgyz herder families were able to preserve their own linguistic and ethno-cultural identity by speaking Kyrgyz at home and by not intermarrying with Uzbeks. My great uncle Anarbay<sup>56</sup> noted that the Kyrgyz men wore their *kalpak*, men's hat made from white felt, and the Uzbek men wore their *ala dopu*, round shaped caps made from cotton.

When I asked my great uncle about how important it was for him and for other Kyrgyz to preserve their identity and culture he told me the following:

**Anarbay:** As you know yourself, we only intermarried among the Kyrgyz living in Uzbekistan. And we carried out all the marriage ceremonies according to Kyrgyz marriage tradition, such as paying the pride price in livestock. Other feasts such as funerals and *ash* (memorial feasts) were carried out according to Kyrgyz culture. Unlike the Uzbeks, we always erected a yurt for the funeral and killed a horse. We invited both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

We also made sure that our children spoke Kyrgyz at home. Therefore, when my youngest daughter went to Bishkek to study, her teachers and friends were very surprised that she spoke Kyrgyz without any accent.

**Kochkorbay (my grandfather):** Uzbeks kill only one sheep for their feasts, whereas we kill a larger animal, usually a horse. My father gave a feast for his first three grandsons in 1957. When the Kyrgyz had such feasts, the Uzbeks were happy, for they got to eat more meat. We had the Kyrgyz traditional horse games such as *ulak*. Uzbeks usually bring artists [musicians] to their feasts, but they have less meat.

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<sup>56</sup> In 1968, my uncle Anarbay was appointed the collective's head farmer, which gave him some tough tasks. He worked as a *perma* (farmer/herder), head of the Kyrgyz herders for thirty years. He was in charge of all the Kyrgyz herders, sheep, horses, and cows. He had to fulfill the farm's wool quota, which was at least two kilograms per sheep and 110-120 lambs from 100 sheep. When they could not fulfill the quota, they gave their own livestock.

Unlike the Kyrgyz, they do not pay bride price and don't steal their brides. The bride's parents prepare the dowry and the gifts for the groom. The groom's side gives only one sheep for the bride's wedding feast; sometimes they buy the meat from the bazaar. They do not serve *jiliks* [parts of cooked sheep meat; see below for the detailed discussion] to the in-laws. I personally participated in their *kudachilik* [first meeting of the in-laws]. They divide the rib into four pieces and serve to the guests. Besides killing a horse for the people, we also give *soyush* to all the relatives coming from far and near.

*Were there cases when your Uzbek friends or neighbors asked your daughters' hand in marriage?*

**Anarbay:** In principle, I would not strongly oppose if some of my children married an Uzbek. But none of them had such intentions. There were many Uzbeks who wanted to marry my daughters or give their daughters to my sons. Some of the wealthy families even offered to pay the bride price according to Kyrgyz custom. But I refused to give my daughters, saying that your customs do not fit my customs and vice versa. If my daughters married Uzbeks, they would not have been able to adapt to Uzbek life and culture and they would have left their marriage sooner or later.

Moreover, Uzbeks follow religion more strictly than the Kyrgyz. They dislike men who are over thirty and do not pray five times a day, whereas, we the Kyrgyz begin praying when we reach the age of 70-80, though not all do. Because we grew up in the mountains being free, we did not have much to do with religion.

As for their personality, they are kind and very hospitable people. However, as the saying goes: [The kindness of] the Kyrgyz lasts all the way around the mountain (for a long time), whereas, the Sart's all the around the house (for a very short time). This saying refers to the duration of one's kindness.

Also, we are close to our paternal relatives. They, unlike us, feel closer to their maternal relatives. They don't have the tradition of knowing their tribal history. Instead, they say that they are Uzbeks or tell you: "I am from Namangan or Andijon."

We, as nomads, look more stout and stronger than the sedentary Uzbeks. Kyrgyz are calm people who do not pay much attention to small things. Uzbeks are very hard working people. They are very good farmers and do the best agricultural work. What else would they do if they don't go to the mountains?

The following interview was taken from my fifty-year-old maternal uncles Askar Süyünaliyev, who has been a herder his entire life. He is the father of five children, all of whom are married and have children of their own. His two oldest sons help him with herding his livestock and mares. They live in a mountainous Kyrgyz village called Ak-Suu (White River), which has no Uzbek population. Ak-Suu is about 40 km away from the Uzbek border in the Aksı region of southern Kyrgyzstan. My uncle, before the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was closed, interacted with Uzbeks--mostly men--in bazaars when he came to sell cattle and buy goods in my hometown of Kizil-Jar.

*How would you characterize Uzbeks based on your personal interaction with them?*

Uzbeks find a common language quite fast. They have a sweet and soft language so that you do not even notice how quickly they get inside you. When you go to the bazaar they can easily deceive you. They are not like the Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz are more trusting and laid-back. They do not care much about money. They (the Uzbeks) consider one or two *soms* (Kyrgyz monetary unit) as money. Most often we sell our cattle to them for fifty or a hundred *soms* cheaper.

When they visit our village by chance, we open our doors and let them stay overnight at our house, whereas if we happened to go to their house, they do not open their door. They seem to be afraid. One time, it became quite late and we wanted to stay overnight at one of our (Uzbek) acquaintance's house in Besh-Tal in the Kosh-Döbö area. His wife said that her *kojoyun* (husband or master) was not home and thus did not let us in. Among the Kyrgyz, our women can invite guests into the house before her husband gets home.

When a guest comes to our house, we immediately bring whatever food we have to the table. They (Uzbeks), however, sit there for a long time cutting and chopping their carrots and onions, and the food will be ready late in the evening. We, the Kyrgyz, when we invite someone to our house, we invite from our heart, whereas the Uzbeks do it with the tip of their tongue.

Your *tayata* (my maternal grandfather, his father)'s distant uncle is an Uzbek. One time we visited his house and they brought rice pilaf with meat on top. My uncle used to visit us a lot, so he knew our way of



serving food. His son was cutting the cooked meat and my uncle was winking at him saying that he has to cut the meat into bigger pieces and that he should pour us vodka almost filling our glasses. It is also interesting that they kept telling us over and over that we should eat food even though we were already eating. They themselves did not eat much. Even when they are hungry they hesitate to eat.

I spoke to many Uzbeks who came to our village as *mandikers*, (hired laborers). For some reason, many of them lie to you that their uncle or grandfather was Kyrgyz. I think they are afraid of us or want to be closer to us. Once I hired about ten Uzbek women to cut sunflower heads. One of them said that her husband was Kyrgyz. They stayed in a tent for five days. Their ages were between twenty and forty. We gave them breakfast in the morning, a warm meal for lunch, and butter, bread, and tea for dinner followed by apples and watermelons. They are hardworking people in general. They can endure the heat much better than we do. They wear their scarves on their heads and their knives in their hands and they just keep working. We are used to living in the mountains. If our women do similar work, they do it quietly, whereas these women kept talking loudly and made a lot of noise.

*If your daughter fell in love with an Uzbek man, would you give her to him?*

No, I would not. They make their new bride cover her head and face and wear *ishtans* (traditional loose pants worn by Uzbek women in summer time) and do not let her go outside. Also, I do not want my grandchildren to be Uzbek. Their customs are very different from ours. One time we went to the funeral of my (Uzbek) uncle Adilbek's mother (in Uzbekistan). They locked up her body alone in the house and stood there without crying. We did not follow their customs. My father, mother and I all entered their courtyard crying out loud (in the Kyrgyz way). Our uncle's wife approached us and said that we should not cry. My father pushed her away. She got upset and said cursingly: "Do whatever you want!" So we continued crying out loud as we walked towards the house. There was total silence, no sounds of wailing to be heard. No one was eating food. My father went into the house to see the deceased. We were invited to another room where we recited Quran in honor of the deceased. They served us tea. This took place in 1976.

Before discussing the above statements, I would like to present another interview, which I took from an educated Kyrgyz couple in Kizil-Jar. This couple has worked closely with ethnic Uzbeks living and studying in the town:

*Would you give your daughter to an Uzbek?*

**The wife:** We would never marry our daughter(s) to an Uzbek! I am a nationalist and I hate the Uzbeks, because I have worked with them and know them pretty well. As the Kyrgyz saying goes: “Kirgiz kir aylangicha, Sart tam aylangicha,” “[The kindness of] the Kyrgyz lasts all the way around mountain (for a long time), the Sarts’ all the way around the house (for a very short period.)” They are *labbaychi*.<sup>57</sup> They do not say things from their heart but only with their tongue.

**The husband:** The difference between the mentality of the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks is like the sky and the earth. Concepts of good and bad, shame, pride and honor are much stronger among us. Uzbeks do things only for money. To give you a basic example, the *mendikers* (*hired laborers*): I offered them one *som* per kilo of cotton<sup>58</sup> picked and I was going to take them to the cotton field by car. However, when my friend offered them one *som* and two *tiyins* (*coins/cents*) per kilo, they immediately went to him, all of them, men and women together.

Another thing is that their society is based on matriarchy. Among the Uzbeks, the mother plays a big role in bringing up the children. If a Kyrgyz man marries an Uzbek woman, his children will become Uzbek and grow up being hypocritical, dishonest, and cunning. For example, if we have some money related issues in our family, we can forgive each other, whereas, they make a big scandal out of it. We are embarrassed of what other people say about us if they hear us.

Also, the Uzbeks are people with no roots. They do not know who their seven forefathers or tribe/clan are. In regard to kinship, they are much closer to their mother’s side. We carry the tribal name from our father’s side. That is why they call their homeland, native town, or village *Ona Vatan* (Motherland), and we call it *Ata Meken* (Fatherland).

The Uzbeks do not like the Kyrgyz. They say that we are rude. 20% of Kizil-Jar’s population is Uzbeks. There is another saying “Sarttin toyuna bargicha, ariqtin boyuna bar”, i.e., “It is better to go to a stream than to go to a Sart’s feast.” In other words, one can at least dip bread into

<sup>57</sup> The word *labbay* comes from Persian “Labbai” “I am listening,” “I am in your service” and in Kyrgyz it implies that the person is trying to please someone.

<sup>58</sup> The southern region of Kyrgyzstan, including my hometown Kizil-Jar, is part of the Ferghana Valley, where cotton monoculture was practiced during the Soviet period. During the cotton-picking season, from September to late December, all middle school and high school students in the Ferghana Valley were mobilized by the state to pick this “white gold.” Since the Soviet collapse, Kyrgyzstan stopped using its school children for cotton picking, whereas Uzbekistan, which remains the third largest cotton producing country in the world, still relies on the labor of children. The worsening economic situation in rural Uzbekistan is forcing people--mostly women and children-- to go to neighboring countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to work as laborers. My hometown Kizil-Jar is still largely agricultural where the majority of the Kyrgyz grow cotton. However, when it comes to picking cotton, they hire the Uzbek *mendikers* who come across the border. During cotton season, one side of the local bazaar in Kizil-Jar becomes filled with thousands of *mendikers* who are eager to go out to the cotton fields and earn money for their food.

the water, eat it, and feel full. To give you an example: Our (Uzbek) neighbor married his son and the wedding lasted for two days. He bought only one sheep for the feast and he saved the half of the sheep's meat and sold it in the bazaar the next day! They invited us and we went. They brought a plate of ash (rice pilaf) with a tiny piece of meat on top.

As for their women, Kyrgyz women are like you and me [this is a man talking]. Uzbek women are only free among their children and husbands, but in other places they are reserved/conservative. If a man pays a visit to them, they will not let you in saying: "My *kojoyun*<sup>59</sup>(husband) is not home." If they have a male guest, the wife does not enter that room. The husband brings the food to the table. At feasts, men and women sit and eat separately. If there is music, even their old women can go up and sing and dance. And their society is based on matriarchy!

From these descriptions of Uzbeks by ethnic Kyrgyz, we can delineate several ethno-cultural differences or boundaries that form Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnic identities. The three Kyrgyz interviewees mentioned the following distinguishing factors:

- a) The Uzbeks/Sarts are polite and cunning people with a soft and sweet language, whereas the Kyrgyz are honest/open, straightforward, crude and laid back.
- b) Uzbek women are constrained and Kyrgyz women are freer.
- c) Marriage to an Uzbek/Sart is out of the question for the Kyrgyz.
- d) The Uzbek have a "Motherland", whereas the Kyrgyz have a "Fatherland."
- e) Food and Hospitality: There is a difference between Uzbek feasts and funerals and Kyrgyz funerals and feasts.
- f) Popular Kazakh and Kyrgyz proverbs and jokes about the Uzbeks/Sarts, which will be discussed later.
- g) Uzbek have regional identity, whereas Kyrgyz have tribal identity.
- h) Uzbeks are better in agriculture and trading and Kyrgyz are better in livestock raising.

These are common--or what can be called "stereotypical" Kyrgyz views about the Uzbeks. However, we cannot simply dismiss them as mere stereotypes or sweeping generalizations, since they also reveal pertinent contemporary issues and identity markers that divide the two ethnic groups. Fuller and deeper analysis and interpretation of these

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<sup>59</sup> The term derives from the specific group of people called "khoja/khojo" who trace their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad.

views will help us adequately understand the dynamics of ethnic identity creation. Instead of dismissing them as mere generalizations, we need to search for the roots of these “stereotypes” and examine how and why these notions were formed. Ordinary people like our interviewees do not contextualize their statements; therefore, it is important that we as scholars try to contextualize the above claims.

I will take the following four as examples of the Kyrgyz perception of Uzbeks, and illustrate each one in detail: language, Uzbek regional identity vs. Kyrgyz tribal identity, food and hospitality, and women.

### The “Naïve” Kyrgyz and the “Cunning” Uzbeks

One common perception about the difference between the nature of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz is the following:

- a) The Uzbeks are cunning people with a soft and sweet language, whereas the Kyrgyz are honest, straightforward, “crude” and laid back.

The above-mentioned saying, “[The kindness of] the Kyrgyz lasts all the way around mountain (for a long time), the Sarts’ all the way around the house, (i.e., for a very short period)” reflect the popular view of the Kyrgyz about the Uzbeks/Sarts well.” In other words, Sarts/merchants are only kind and nice to you until they sell you their goods.

As stated earlier, the nomadic Turks in the Kültegin inscriptions viewed the Chinese as sly people who spoke with sweet words. According to Stevan Harrell, a similar view is held about “Sinified” Inner Mongols who have grown up in cities

speaking Chinese. They still consider the Hans to be cunning, sly, and untrustworthy.”<sup>60</sup>

Why do the languages of the Chinese and Uzbeks, both representing sedentary culture, sound soft and sweet to the ear of the nomadic Mongols and Kyrgyz? Do they refer to the different sounds and tones in the Chinese and Uzbek languages, or to something else? In the case of the Uzbek language, it is probable that when the Kyrgyz say that the Uzbeks are cunning people with a soft and sweet language, they are referring partly to the sound and partly to the tone of their language as well as to the character and mentality of the people. The modern literary Uzbek language has lost some phonetic features once present in its older Turkic ancestors, such as vowel harmony which is also well preserved in modern Kyrgyz. The modern literary Uzbek language does not harmonize hard “q” sound to soft “g” in adding dative case and pronounce the vowel “a” softer. In addition, the Uzbek language adopted many Persian and Arabic words which retain conservative pronunciations. The Kyrgyz also borrowed many words from the Persian and Arabic languages, but they adopted them to fit the phonetic and phonological peculiarities of their native tongue—which include vowel and consonant harmony.

The “sweet sound” of the Uzbek language seems also to be closely associated with the particular character and mentality of the Uzbeks. Many Kyrgyz believe that this arrives from their socio-economic life, which is deeply rooted in sedentary/merchant culture and economy, and is highly dependent on trading goods and agricultural products. As professional merchants, the Uzbeks and their ancestors had to develop a specialized vocabulary and professional language skills for “customer service.” As is true for any trader and merchant, they had to be kind and use polite and sweet words with their

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<sup>60</sup> Comment by Stevan Harrell, Professor of Anthropology, University of Washington.

customers in order to “lure them in” and sell them goods. In the past, caravans of merchants traveled on the Silk Road through the territories of the nomadic Kyrgyz, who often extorted goods and other valuable items from them. The root of the contemporary Uzbek “fear” of the Kyrgyz seems to go back to this historic relationship. When merchants traveled through foreign territories and mountains where the nomadic Kyrgyz lived, they feared that their goods and valuable items would be robbed. We read in Kyrgyz oral epics, including *Manas*, scenes where merchants from East and West are robbed while passing through the nomadic Kyrgyz settlements. This historical practice of the mountain Kyrgyz, who had little appreciation for the sedentary/merchant culture, was considered rude and barbaric by sedentary people. Logically, in order to avoid extortion by the “barbarians,” merchants had to be extra polite to please these customers. Many lied that they had some kind of kinship relationship with the Kyrgyz, hoping that their goods would be spared from being extorted.

When mountain Kyrgyz, like my uncle, buy goods from Uzbek merchants--who are very skilled in customer service--they are quite astonished by their kind, sweet language. Among other things, he also mentioned the popular belief among the Kyrgyz that the Uzbeks/Sarts are dishonest. When I asked people to give examples, they mostly mentioned the hospitality etiquette of the Uzbeks. And this leads us to the discussion of the important tradition of food and hospitality among the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.

### Food and Hospitality among the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz

I would like to repeat the earlier mentioned popular saying among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs: “Sarttīn toyuna bargancha, ariktīn boyuna bar,” “It is better to go to a stream,

than to go to a Sart's feast." This saying refers to the amount of food served at Kyrgyz/Kazakh feasts versus the food at a Sart/Uzbek feast. I personally heard this saying many times from many Kyrgyz who returned from their Uzbek friends' and neighbors' feasts. They always complained that there was not enough food for everyone. Only a small plate of pilaf with one or two small pieces of meat was served for four or more people, and each of them ate only one or two handfuls of rice.

As in every culture, hospitality among the traditional Central Asians starts with the invitation of a guest or friend into one's house. Here it is important to mention a well-known joke among the Uzbeks themselves regarding inviting someone for cup of tea or a meal. In Uzbek culture, when one invites a person for cup of tea or a meal, they do not always mean it, but do it out of politeness. Most Uzbeks are aware of this "polite" aspect of their hospitality. In other words, when an Uzbek says to another Uzbek or Kyrgyz: "Please come in for a cup of tea," or "I will make pilaf," most of the time, he/she does not really mean it, but says it to be polite.<sup>61</sup> From this real life experience in their culture, a joke/expression developed among the Uzbeks themselves: "Namanganchami yoki ? "Is it a Namangan invitation or [real?]" Therefore, when my uncle said: "When, we, the Kyrgyz, invite someone to our house, we say it truly from our heart, whereas the Uzbeks say it with the tip of their tongue," he is referring to this difference. When he says: "When a guest comes to our house, we immediately bring whatever food we have out to the *dastorkhon* (tablecloth) covered with food. They [the Uzbeks] sit there for a long time cutting and chopping their carrots and onions, and the food will be ready late in the evening," he means that some Uzbeks do not want to or cannot afford to serve *ash* (rice

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<sup>61</sup> I heard that the Chinese (may) do the same.

pilaf) which is the most respectful meal in their culture, and therefore, pretend that they are getting ready to cook pilaf by cutting and chopping the carrots, hoping that the guest(s) will leave.

The major difference between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz diets is that unlike the Uzbeks, the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs traditionally consume a great deal of meat. This is especially true at special occasions, family gatherings, weddings, funerals, and memorial feasts where they slaughter not one, but several sheep and at least one horse. The Kyrgyz criticize the Uzbeks for hosting hundreds of people with the meat of just one sheep or half a sheep. The rationale is that the Uzbeks as sedentary people did not own much livestock, but grew agricultural products such as fruits and vegetables. Therefore, not every Uzbek family could or can afford to kill a sheep for special occasions. Consuming large amounts of meat is considered a luxury among ordinary Uzbek families. Once the Turkic ancestors of the Uzbeks integrated with the Sarts—the original inhabitants of present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and gave up their nomadic lifestyle, their diet and hospitality customs adapted themselves to fit the demands of the Sarts' sedentary/agricultural economy. The Uzbeks, who are descendants of both the Sart





Figure 13: My paternal uncle Oros skinning a sheep, Īspī, 2005



Figure 14: My paternal uncle Kojomkul skinning a sheep, Īspī, 2003.

townsmen and merchants and/or urbanized and themselves became farmers and merchants took a lesson from the long-established merchant/trade culture not to waste money and food, but to save and economize.

It is not required in modern Uzbek society to kill a sheep or a larger animal, such as a horse or a cow for special occasions or for respected guest(s), such as the in-laws of married children and foreign visitors. If the Uzbeks do kill a sheep, they do not serve the sheep's cooked meat in the same way as the Kyrgyz or Kazakhs do. The Kyrgyz and Kazakhs -- and (I believe) all the other nomadic groups -- such as the Mongols, Altay Turks, and Tuvans--are very conscious of how the pieces of cooked sheep should be separated and served to the guests. They carefully separate the meat according to its muscle structure and boil large pieces in big *qazans* (cast iron cauldrons). Different parts of the sheep *jiliks/shibagas* are served to the guests according their age, gender, and social status. All animals have twelve *jilik* and each *jilik* has a name<sup>62</sup>:

1. Two *jambash*, the hind quarters, the most respected *jilik* served to the oldest male or female (if the sheep has a *kuymulchak*, a fat tail, then the oldest women gets it);
2. Two *kashka jilik*, rear thighs, served to both men and women according to their age;
3. Two *chüköliü jilik*, lower rear legs with a knee bone, served to both men and women according to their age;
4. Two *dali*, shoulders;
5. Two *kar jilik*, upper forelegs: given to men or women who are younger than those who received the *kashka* and *chüköliü jilik*;
6. Two *joto/korto jilik*, lower front legs, served to the youngest person among the guests.

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<sup>62</sup> The Kazakhs have slightly different terms for their *shibaga* or *jilik*. For descriptions of Kazakh traditional hospitality and rituals of food/meat serving etiquette, which are no different from those of the Kyrgyz, please see pages 220-223 of Akseleu Seydimbek's book called *Mir Kazakhov. Etnokul'turologicheskoe pereosmyslenie* (World of the Kazakhs. Ethno-cultural Rethinking). Almaty: RAUAN, 2001.

Besides these six pairs of *jiliks*, there is the *kuymulchak* which is located between the two hips, and the *bash*, head.

Grodekov, 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographer describes all the appropriate names of sheep's body parts among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs and how they should be served to the guests. The most respected part of the sheep, the head is usually given to elderly men. According to the Kuraminsk *uezd*, the men usually receive the head, ribs, vertebrae, and the women are given the hips, thighs, and forelegs.<sup>63</sup> Today, in Kyrgyzstan, the etiquette of serving lamb varies from region to region to a certain extent. It is so important, that some people will be upset if they feel that they received the less valued or smaller parts. Therefore, they appoint as a "meat man" someone who really knows the tradition. There is a fixed order and ritual of serving the *jilik* and meals prepared from a killed sheep's

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<sup>63</sup> Grodekov N. I. *Kirgizy I Karakirgizy Syr-Dariinskoi oblasti: Yuridicheskii byt*. Tashkent: Tipografiiia S. I. Laxtina, Romonovskaia ul. Sob. Dom., Vol. 1, 1889. p. 9.

Upon the Russian conquest of Central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century one of the main tasks of Russian administrators and intellectuals was to learn and write about the *inorodtsy*, the native people and their traditions and customs in order to establish Tsarist administrative rule. Many Russian missionaries, ethnographers, travelers were sent into the steppe as well as to the Islamic cities inhabited by "pagan" nomads and pious Muslims to collect ethnographic material about their everyday life, especially customary law by which the people lived. One such fieldwork study was conducted by a Russian named Vyshnegorskii who gathered enormous amount of information among the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz of the Syr-Darya province. Although his material mostly deals with the juridical life of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, it contains other detailed and valuable information on the religious and socio-cultural aspects of their everyday life. As the editor of the book notes, the learning of the customary law of the nomads was very important for the "right establishment of [Russian] administrative rule and law among the nomads, but, at the same time, was significant for *nauka*, i.e., science." (Grodekov, p. 1) Prior to this work which was published in 1889 several books and articles had been published on the traditional law as well as on general cultural aspects of the native people's life. However, Grodekov, the editor is critical of their generalization of the subject and the tone of their narrative and incomplete content. Some of those major publications were "Opisanie kirgiz-kazakskix ord i stepey" (1831) written by A. Levshin, "Kirgizskaia step' Orenburgskogo vedomstva" (1865) by Meyer, and "Proekta polozenia ob upravlenii v oblastiax Semirechenskoi I Syr-Dariinskoi (1865), "Yuridicheskii obychai kirgizov" (1876). Thus, in 1886, Grodekov hired a student named A. N. Vyshnegorskii, who had graduated from the Institute of History and Philology and knew Kazakh, Uzbek, and Persian, for doing an ethnographic research among the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. He was sent to various *uezds* and lived among the natives for seven months interviewing the local tribal leaders, *biys*, judges, mullahs as well as the common people. (p. V) Vyshnegorskii was told to record all the versions of traditional customs and law practices of each locale or tribal group without adding and omitting anything. (p. V).

meat. When the ritual food is being served, guests do not have a choice in terms of what *jilik* they prefer; instead, they follow the tradition of the institutionalized food/meat culture.<sup>64</sup> Before they start serving any *jilik*, *sorpo/sorpa*—a clear broth in which the meat is boiled-- is served to each guest. Then they bring the head and give it to the most respected oldest man, but never to a woman. The hair/wool of the sheep's head is first burned and cleaned in hot water and then boiled together with the rest of the *jilik*. According to custom, the oldest man cuts off a small piece of meat from the head and then passes it to a younger man, who finishes cutting it into small pieces. Then the cut pieces of the head are passed to all the guests to taste. The *kuyruk-boor*, thinly sliced tail fat and liver dipped in salty broth, follows the head and it is served to the most respected guests, such as in-laws.

The means of observing the laws of hospitality and preparation of food among the Kazakhs [and Kyrgyz] have been linked with peculiarities of their cultural and economic life. Each meal has its special ritual meaning, determines the level of respect and attention to, and shows the level of kinship relationship with the person to whom the meal is served. Protocol is also contingent upon the social status of the guest.<sup>65</sup> According to nomadic Kyrgyz culture, one can and should host only twelve people with the meat of one sheep. The host should know the tradition of *jilik tartuu* (serving the *jilik*) very well-- i.e., who should be given which *jilik*. Before they bring the plates of *jilik* into the guest room, the host consults with the other elderly relatives helping in the kitchen as to which *jilik* should be served first and to whom. After the guests finish eating or tasting their

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<sup>64</sup> Seydimbek, Akseleu. *Mir Kazakhov. Etnokul'turologicheskoe pereosmyslenie (World of the Kazakhs. Ethno-cultural Rethinking)*. Almaty: RAUAN, 2001, p. 221.

<sup>65</sup> Seydimbek, p. 220.

*jilik*, the *besh barmak*, a traditional noodle dish mixed with meat cut into small pieces, is served. Of course, the guests do not usually eat all their *jilik*, unless they are very hungry. The host usually wraps each guest's *jilik* and gives it to them to take home. Sometimes, a guest, usually elderly, tastes his *jilik* and then just gives it away to one of the children in the house. It is a great honor for a young person to get the *shibaga* shared with him/her by an elderly person. This food/meat culture and etiquette among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs who still preserve this tradition is firmly institutionalized.

The first aspect of hospitality is welcoming a guest, including unexpected visitors, into the house. As the above three Kyrgyz noted, Uzbeks, especially their women, do not usually let any male--either family's friend, or stranger--into their house if their *kojoyun* (husband) is not at home. This is considered very rude and inhospitable among the Kyrgyz. Kyrgyz women, mostly in the villages, should invite any unexpected guest or visitor, man or woman, into their house and at least offer tea. Then, if the guest intends to stay longer, she should and does start preparing food before her husband comes. In traditional Uzbek families, the wife does not join the male guests, and the husband does not sit together with the female guests, unless they are close relatives. The male and female segregation is usually linked with Muslim culture. However, there was also a practical reason for the lack of this separation among the nomadic Kyrgyz. Unlike sedentary houses with multiple rooms, the nomadic yurt had only one "room." Thus, women in nomadic society did not have a choice, like women in sedentary society, to sit in a separate "room" and chat with each other.

## Kyrgyz Tribal Identity vs. Uzbek Regional Identity

The tradition of knowing the name of one's *uruu* (tribe) and the *uruk* (clan within the tribe) and also the names of one's seven (paternal) forefathers have always played an important role in Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic society. As mentioned ethnographer Grodekov also points out the importance of tribal affiliation among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. This tradition of knowing one's tribal genealogy, or at least the names of one's seven forefathers played a significant role in the identity of the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. People identified themselves with their tribal name. When two persons met they first asked the question: "From which tribe are you?" or "Whose son/daughter are you?" One sought help and protection from his/her own tribe in case of crisis. The entire tribe or clan was responsible for the crime committed by the member of that tribe.<sup>66</sup> For example, if one kills someone and is not able to pay the *qun*, blood price, his tribe will have to pay it.<sup>67</sup> Grodekov also notes that the *aksakals*, i.e., white bearded elderly men and the rich were the carriers of customs and socio-cultural values. People who did not know their ancestors were condemned as rootless. The author provides proverbs and sayings that support the strong affiliation to one's own tribe and homeland: "A fool does not know where he/she is born", "One who does not know his/her seven forefathers is ignorant," "Don't go hunting with someone from another tribe, he will bring you bad luck," "It is better to be a shepherd (slave) in your own land (tribe) than being a king in a foreign land," "A dog does not forget the place where he ate, a man where he is born," "One who

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<sup>66</sup> Grodekov N. 1889, p. 12.

<sup>67</sup> Op.cit.

separates himself from his tribe will be eaten up by a wolf,” etc.<sup>68</sup> These proverbs can still be heard among the people.

This is also demonstrated in the usage of the terms “Ona Yurt/Ona Vatan,” Motherland, among the Uzbeks and “Ata-Jurt/Ata Meken” Fatherland, among the Kyrgyz. Kyrgyz and Kazakh children carry the tribal name of their father, and their tribal name is their tribal identity. Among the sedentary Uzbeks, their identity was closely associated with the town, city, or region in which they resided. For example, they will say *Namanganlikman* or *Andijonlikman*, i.e., I am from Namangan or Andijon. According to Stevan Harrell, this distinction is found between the Nuosu and Chinese in southwestern China: “It’s interesting how these pastoral (or, in the Nuosu case, semi-pastoral)/agricultural differences parallel themselves across regions.”<sup>69</sup>

Grodekov discusses the importance of knowing one’s tribal genealogy; appropriate age for getting married, children’s education, and the role and status of one’s maternal relatives.<sup>70</sup> As it is mentioned earlier, the tribal affiliation played a key role in people’s life. One of the reasons for being conscious of one’s own tribal history was for marriage purposes. Ideally, the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz did not marry until after seven generations had passed. It was to prevent the distortion of the genes. The author quotes the native expression “tuqumı ösmeydi”, i.e., “children will not grow.” However, with the arrival of Islam, the *mullahs* encouraged people to marry already after two generations for it is allowed in *shari’a*.<sup>71</sup> The author explains all the rules in terms of who

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>69</sup> Comments given by Stevan Harrell, University of Washington, Dept. of Anthropology.

<sup>70</sup> Grodekov, p 23.

<sup>71</sup> Op.cit.

can or can't marry who within a clan. He also talks about the importance of kinship relation and gives a full list of kinship terms that are still being used among the Central Asians Turks. Since it was a patriarchal society the paternal relatives were more important than the maternal ones. However, as it is noted, if there was no father or paternal relatives, *törkün*, maternal relatives protected the children.<sup>72</sup> There is a saying among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz which supports the above factor: “Jeen el bolboyt, jelke taz bolboyt” i.e., “*Jeen*<sup>73</sup> will never be considered one of your own, the nape of the neck never goes bald.”

Turkic peoples have different kinship terms for paternal and maternal relatives. Unlike the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, the majority of Uzbeks lost most of these kinship terms. Traditionally, maternal relatives such as grandparents and uncles and aunts are very much respected in Kyrgyz society; however, children never identify themselves with their maternal tribal name. This respectful distance between the *jeen* and *taga jurt* or *tayeke* (maternal kinsmen/uncles) is well reflected in the above mentioned popular Kyrgyz saying: “Your *jeen* will never become one of your own, the nape of the neck will never go bald.” I heard another interesting saying when I took my three year-old son, who is a restless and mischievous little boy, to my parents’ and grandparent’s house. Since my son does not share the same tribal identity with me and my relatives, he is *jeen* to them. And *jeen* in traditional Kyrgyz society are usually treated with great respect at their maternal relatives’ house and visa versa. Seeing my son’s mischievous behavior at their house, my uncles would say: “Jeen kelgenche jeti börü kelsin,” “It is better to have seven wolves come over, than having a *jeen* visit us.” My mother would say: “Kızdiki kıziktirat,

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>73</sup> Children of a female relative.



uulduku uukturat,” “The daughter’s child is cute, the son’s child makes you melt.” When I asked her to elaborate it, she said: “Your child is very sweet and we love him dearly, but my son’s child smells like my own children, whereas, your son’s smell is foreign to us.”

## Women in Kyrgyz and Uzbek Societies

Many foreign travelers and ethnographers who visited Central Asia in the past observed the liberal nature of women in Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic societies, and compared them with the more conservative nature of Sart (Uzbek) and Tajik women. In almost every given society, be it sedentary/agrarian or nomadic/cattle breeding, women have played a central role in the family. They have been responsible for the education of children and all the work concerning the household. The yurt among the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Turkmens usually was the property of the women, and they took control of all the household items. Women were naturally expected to have all the skills related to household work, such as cooking, milking, making butter and cheese, cleaning, washing, making felt, weaving, spinning, embroidering, etc. When moving from pasture to pasture, even the erecting and dismantling of the yurt was done by women. There are special techniques for setting up and placing all the interior and exterior decorations, and women were deemed better at handling this. A Kyrgyz proverb states: “Bakıldagan tekeni suu kechkende köröbüz, shakıldagan jengeni üy chechkende köröbüz,” “We will see the proud he-goat when he struggles crossing the river, we will see the boisterous sister-in-law when she struggles dismantling the yurt.” This saying related exclusively with the Kyrgyz nomadic culture in which the dismantling of the yurt was done mainly by

women. Dismantling the yurt has to be done quickly (15-20 minutes), for it has its certain techniques which women (in the past) were required to command.

Felix Rocca, an Italian traveler who visited the Kyrgyz living in the Pamir and Alay mountains at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also describes the above-mentioned duties of Kyrgyz women around the household and states: “The Kyrgyz women are very different from other women. They became bold and strong due to the difficult weather conditions. Most often they equal the men in terms of their openness and bold character.”<sup>74</sup>

Racial and socio-cultural factors play an important role in marriage matters between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. Even though the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz are both considered Turkic people and speak two varieties of Turkic languages, their physical features set them apart and serve as a racial boundary. Most Uzbeks appear more Middle Eastern, whereas the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz have Asiatic/Mongol features. Kyrgyz believe that if a Kyrgyz man marries an Uzbek woman, his child will not look Kyrgyz. Moreover, as the husband of an interviewed Kyrgyz couple notes, since “Uzbek society is based on matriarchy,” children of mixed marriages will grow up not knowing their tribal roots from their Kyrgyz father’s side.

Most Kyrgyz, especially in Kizil-Jar, which has a significant number of ethnic Uzbeks, consider it a disgrace to marry their children to an Uzbek (Sart) family. One finds only a few mixed marriages in my hometown. I sensed that the strongest objection usually came from the Kyrgyz parents who very much opposed their son’s or daughter’s

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<sup>74</sup> Felix Rocca, “Pamir jana Alay Kirgizdari.” (Pamir and Alay Kyrgyz). Translated from French by Leonid Stroilov. In: *Kirgizdar. Sanjira, Tarikh, Muras, Salt* (The Kyrgyz: Genealogy, History, Heritage, and Tradition) Vol., 1, Bishkek: “Kyrgyzstan” Press, 1993, p. 249.

marriage to an Uzbek. People usually take it as an offense and say: “Oh, so and so or so and so’s daughter/son married a Sart.” They often say: *Kyrgyz kurup kalgansip*, “As if all the Kyrgyz were dried out.”

In both in traditional Uzbek and Kyrgyz societies, marriage is not just the marriage between the two people, but between the two families and the relatives of the newlyweds. As long as the couple stays in their marriage, their parents and relatives also keep in touch by inviting each other to family gatherings. In traditional Kyrgyz society, the relationship between *kudas* (the in-laws) is very important. Good Kyrgyz *kudas* show utmost respect for each other, and they express and demonstrate their respect by inviting each other to their traditional feasts, funerals, and memorial feasts, where they serve the in-laws the most respected parts of meat of the killed animal, and give them the best *kiyit* (gifts of clothes).

The tradition of paying a bride price still plays an important role in the contemporary marriage traditions among the Kyrgyz. In the past, the bride price was given in livestock, and in rural areas, it is still so. When my two younger brothers got married, my parents paid the *kaling* in livestock. Not every Kyrgyz family can afford to give so much livestock, but tradition still requires that they pay it symbolically by bringing at least a few animals. In Uzbek Muslim culture, it is usually the opposite; i.e., the bride’s side ends up paying for most of the expenditures of the wedding, and according to tradition, she must pay for her own dowry, which has to be complete. The parents of a Kyrgyz bride also send her with dowry, but the value and amount of the dowry usually depends on the bride price paid by the groom.

In regard to the education of children, mothers played an important role in the upbringing of the daughters. There are many proverbs and sayings regarding the upbringing of a girl in traditional Kyrgyz society. One popular saying goes: “Enesin körüp kiz’in al, eshigin küp törünö öt,” “One looks at the mother before marrying her daughter, just like one looks around the house before taking the seat of honor.” If the daughter does not have good manners or womanly skills, usually the mother is to be blamed. Some other expressions include “If the mother is good, the daughter is also good, if the father is good then the son is also good,” Kizduu üydö kil jatpayt, “Not even a strand of hair lies in a house that has a daughter,” “Kizga kırk jerden tiyu,” “For a girl, rules come from forty [many] peoples.” One of the reasons for paying close attention to a girl’s upbringing was closely linked with her future married life. While growing up, young girls were aware of the fact that they would have to get married at a certain age. Or as the proverb states clearly: “Buudaydın barar jeri-tegirmen, kizdın barar jeri-küyöö,” “The destination for wheat is a mill, and for a girl is a husband,” or “Kiz—konok,” “A daughter is only a guest [one day she will leave her parent’s house.]”

Despite the fact that the women of the nomadic Kyrgyz have been portrayed as being strong and open, there were also certain limitations in terms of being equal to men. Kyrgyz women knew their position and status in their society, but for many, their nomadic life style often forced them to go beyond the boundaries of gender.

The conservative nature of women and strong male and female division in traditional Uzbek society is usually associated with Muslim tradition, which dictates separate rules of conduct for Muslim men and women. Even though Islam claims that Muslim women share equal rights with Muslim men, the socio-cultural realities of many

Muslim societies paint a different picture. During a discussion about the role of Uzbek and Kyrgyz women with my grandmother Kumu, she told me the following story:

In the past, when a group of Kyrgyz men went to Namangan on camelback, the Uzbek men forced them to dismount their camels while passing through their neighborhood because they did not want these strange men to see their wives over their high mud walls.

## Conclusion

Some scholars argue that before the Soviets divided Central Asia into various republics, the people in the region had a common identity as Turkestani. In 1918, the Central Asian “nationalists” were able to create the Turkistan Autonomous Republic which included all the regions of present day Central Asia excluding the northern part of Kazakhstan. However, this autonomy was granted to them temporarily by Lenin and Stalin to disarm nationalism and resistance among those non-Russian ethnic groups. As Gladney notes: “For Central Asia the breakup of the Soviet Union thus did not lead to the creation of a greater ‘Turkistan’ or pan-Islamic collections of states, despite the predominantly Turkic and Muslim populations of the region. Rather, the break fell along ethnic and national lines.”<sup>75</sup>

After the break up of the Soviet Union, western scholars--especially Turks in Turkey--hoped for the (possible) unification of the Central Asian Turkic peoples as one Turkic nation under name Turkistan. They soon realized that this idea was impossible. After the Central Asians declared their independence, each country went its own way

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<sup>75</sup> Gladney, Dru C., p. 463.

towards building an independent and “democratic” nation state by recreating separate national symbols and reshaping national identities for their nation. In 1995, the president of Uzbekistan, Islom Karimov initiated the idea of creating a common cultural organization for Central Asian republics under the logo “Turkistan is Our Common Home.” He appointed the prominent Kyrgyz writer, Chingiz Aitmatov as the President of the cultural organization. Not soon after, the president of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, announced his own state ideology for the multi-ethnic population of his country: “Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home.” Leaders of the new Central Asian states are products of the Soviet system, which educated them in the spirit of Soviet artificial brotherhood and friendship, but at the same time told them that they were different from each other. The Central Asian states are still in the process of forging national identities for their people through formal education, TV, and mass media. Since their ideologies are linked with people’s traditional values, people do not see them as negative acts on the part of their government. At the same time, they are aware that many activities of government officials, including the presidents, are carried out for political purposes, especially during elections. As one of the means to legitimize their political power, the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been organizing many big national festivals, holidays and celebrations, such as independence days, and the anniversaries of oral epics, birth dates of epic singers and poets, and even days for ancient cities like Bukhara and Khiva (in Uzbekistan), and Osh (in Kyrgyzstan). This, however, is not characteristic of Central Asian countries alone. In his book titled *On the Subject of “Java”*<sup>76</sup>, John Pemberton explores the issues of “origins, authenticity, identity,

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<sup>76</sup> Pemberton, John. *On the Subject of Java*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.

customary practice, and tradition” under the New Order rule of Soeharto in Java.<sup>77</sup>

Pemberton argues that the New Order rule legitimized its power and asserted [It ended when Soeharto stepped down] its social rule in the country by explicitly making references to Javanese “traditional values,” “cultural inheritance,” and “ritual events.” Their national elections are viewed as “cultural representations,” e.g., a “Festival of Democracy” which is considered a ritual or “a rite with the purpose of restoring the wholeness of chaotic society and nature.”<sup>78</sup> A similar congruence of politics and culture existed during the Soviet period in which culture and politics were in close relationship; i.e., culture was national in form, socialist in content. The current governments of the independent Central Asian republics may be genuinely promoting their national culture and traditions, but at the same time they may be using national ideology fallaciously as a showcase to legitimize their political power.

As in the former Yugoslavia, Central Asians perceive themselves to be both different and alike: they share much in terms of their language, culture, and history, and yet they are different in their customs, dialects, local histories, dress, and manner. Fortunately, interethnic conflicts and wars such as those in Yugoslavia are unforeseeable, and hopefully will not take place in the future in Central Asia. Mary Gililand argues that the cause of the wars in the former Yugoslavia were economic and political, rather than due to the power of Tito, who was able to repress ethno-nationalism among the Serbs and Croats. However, economic and political factors are always supplemented by socio-cultural and psychological aspects of peoples’ lives. Moreover, Gililand opposes the notion that identity is always primarily associated with ethnicity or nationality. In the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>78</sup> Op.cit.

case of Yugoslavia, media and propaganda had an important impact on the strengthening of nationalism in the former Yugoslav republics. In Central Asia, the local governments control the media to a certain extent. But they do not necessarily agitate people against each other. If Uzbeks broadcast programs about their national culture, which promote the greatness of the Uzbeks and richness of their Uzbek language, art, music, and literature, they do so without any negative reference to their neighbors, who in turn act in the same manner. They usually do not intervene in each other's national politics.

Scholars like Charles Keyes, consider culture as the "primary defining characteristic" of an ethnic group, but he is criticized for not explaining "how people come to recognize their commonalities in the first place."<sup>79</sup> People become self-conscious of their internal "commonalities" when they begin interacting actively with another ethnic group which usually leads a different lifestyle. When the nomadic Kyrgyz-- especially those who live closer to the Uzbeks-- speak about their Kyrgyzness, they usually place themselves in a nomadic and sedentary discourse. The ethnic boundaries between the sedentary Uzbeks and nomadic Kyrgyz were mostly ecological in character, stemming from different lifestyles of nomads and farmers. What Soviet and post-Soviet ideologies and policies have done is to transform these ecological and cultural differences into *national* differences.

Most scholars whose works deal with identity formation come to the conclusion that "the process of ethnogenesis in a multicultural and multiethnic social world is a fluid

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<sup>79</sup> Keyes, Charles, pp. 6-7.



one, which undergoes transformation, revitalization, and reshaping through time.”<sup>80</sup> It is said that it is important to identify the markers or shapers of identity as well as the time or period of these developments and activities. Then we will know that this concept of identity is not static, but rather dynamic, “whether in China or Afghanistan, whether formulated in the thirteenth or twentieth century.”<sup>81</sup> In examining Kyrgyz identity, which is deeply rooted in the Kyrgyz nomadic past, I also tried to study it in terms of its change and adaptation, as well as its continuity and amazing stability and resistance to the changing conditions of time.

In this chapter, we discussed the legacy of historical nomadic and sedentary interaction in the formation of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks ethnic identities. Since both peoples consider themselves Muslim, several questions might arise: “What was and is the role of Islam in these two societies? How and when Islam was spread and contextualized among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, who, due to their nomadic lifestyles, practiced different system of religious beliefs? Does or should their current religious identity as Muslim override their separate ethnic identities as Uzbeks and Kyrgyz? These questions will be explored in the next chapter.

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<sup>80</sup> Gross, Jo-Ann, “Introduction: Approaches to the Problem of Identity Formation.” In: *Muslims in Central Asia. Expressions of Identity and Change*. Ed. by Jo-Ann Gross. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992, p. 17.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.17-18.

## Chapter IV: Islamization and Re-Islamization of Central Asia

In Islam, *umma* is a world community of Muslims who share the same religious belief, practices, behavior, and values as affirmed in the Quran. In principle, this “community [should] override[s] state, regional, and local affinities.”<sup>82</sup> However, some scholars such as Jo-Ann Gross question the relevance of this idea to the case of Central Asia. Gross asks: “So how relevant to Muslims of Central Asia is this broadest community? Where does identification as a member of this world community begin to have meaning, and where does it end, or does it?”<sup>83</sup> I would go further by asking how relevant is this idea to the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who strongly identify themselves culturally with their ancient nomadic heritage, but yet, consider themselves Muslim?

One needs to acknowledge the religious and cultural diversity in Muslim Central Asia between the regions such as Volga-Ural, the Kazakh steppe, Turkestan, and the mountain Kyrgyz. Although all Central Asians considered themselves Muslim, in reality, several important factors such as the nature of the Islamization process, the degree of urbanization, the relationship between native customs and Islamic religion, and most importantly, the nomadic and sedentary cultural lifestyles contributed to their differing attitudes towards Islam.

It is difficult to say exactly in which century the Turkic nomads adopted Islam and when they adopted it and how many of them truly embraced this new religion. Islamization was definitely a long process which lasted for several centuries after the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> Op.cit.

arrival of Islam to the region in the 7-8th centuries A.D. According to a Kazakh scholar Kurmangazy Karamanuly Islam was spread in the Kazakh steppe in three different historical periods during which major historical events took place. The first or early “wave” (*tolqin*) of Islam arrived in the VIII-IX centuries through Arab conquest of Central Asia. It said that the Arabs, “who held their sword in one hand and their Quran in the other hand, walked in the blood” (Qurani menen qilishin qatar ustap, qula duzde qan keshken araptar).<sup>84</sup>

In 751 the battle of Talas (located in present day territory of northern Kyrgyzstan) took place between the Arabs and the Chinese. The Karluks, who were Turkic speaking people, assisted the Arabs in defeating the Chinese in this battle. And after twenty years the Karluks officially adopted Islam. It is said that Kyrgyz, together with other Turkic tribes such as Yagma and Chigil adopted Islam in the 10<sup>th</sup> century during the Karakhanid period. In the year 960 about 200.000 Turkic households stretching from the lake Balkhash to the Caspian Sea adopted Islam.<sup>85</sup> Many mosques and *madrasahs* were built during the Karakhanid period between the 10th-12th centuries.<sup>86</sup> The second phase of the arrival of Islam was during 7-8 centuries Arabs conquered Iran which included the present day territories of Uzbekistan and southeastern part of Kazakhstan and forced the

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<sup>84</sup> Karamanulı, Kurmangazı. *Tangirge tagzım. Ata murang—asil qazınang* (Bowling to *Tengir*. Your Ancestral Heritage is Your Valuable Treasure) (Essay). Almatı: “Ana Tili,” 1996, p. 8.

<sup>85</sup> Notes from Asan Saipov’s lecture titled “History of Islam among the Kyrgyz.” A two-week Women’s Seminar held at the Islamic Institute in Bishkek in June 2003. The Seminar was about Shari’a and the Role of Women in Islam. About 250 young Kyrgyz women dressed in *hijab* participated at the Seminar, which lasted for two weeks from 9:30 till 4:00pm. All presenters were male. Main guest speakers and sponsors were from Iraq and Kuwait. They gave their lectures in Arabic and Kyrgyz students and teachers translated them into Kyrgyz. Every day for two weeks one sheep was killed for food for lunch and was served to the participants and organizers for free.

<sup>86</sup> Yusuf Balasagun, the well-known Central Asian poet, who wrote the long didactic poem *Kutadgu Bilig* (1069), presented his book to Tavghach Bughra Khan, ruler of the Karakhanids in Kashgar, who in turn made him Privy Chamberlain and bestowed him an honorary title Yusuf Khass Hajib..

people to become Muslim. The Arabs tried to eliminate “local beliefs and customs and change personal names and names of lands.”<sup>87</sup> However, as the author notes, Kazakhs living in other parts of the region continued to practice their native or ancestral religion, but even the degree of Muslimness of southeastern nomadic Kazakhs was very different than their sedentary brothers.<sup>88</sup> The strong religious pressure onto the nomadic Kazakhs was in the Golden Horde era during the reigns of Berke khan (1255-1266) and Özbek khan (1312-1342). It is said that Özbek khan forced Kazakhs to accept Islam. The collapse of Golden Horde brought the establishment of Kazakh khanates and the active Islamization process seized.<sup>89</sup> The third wave of Islamization was in middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the rule of Ekaterina II, who in 1772 allotted money from her treasure house to publish 3600 copies of Quran and ordered them to be distributed to the Kazakhs free. She also ordered the publishing house in Kazan to publish more religious books and the building of muftiyat of Orenburg region and sent many Tatar mullahs to spread Islam among the Kazakhs. “Young Kazakhs were also sent to *madrasahs* (Islamic religious schools) in Kazan, Orenburg, and Astrakhan to receive Islamic education.”<sup>90</sup>

The majority of Kyrgyz scholars believe that Turkic peoples of Central Asia adopted Islam voluntarily, whereas the Kazakh and Kyrgyz scholars and intellectuals believe that Islam arrived in Central Asia by force.<sup>91</sup> Kurmangazı Karamanulı states “no

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<sup>87</sup> Karamanulı, p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>91</sup> For the arrival of the Arabs in Central Asia, see sources such as H.A.R. Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia* and W. Barthold, *Turkistan Down to the Mongol Invasion*.

nation/people can voluntarily give up their native beliefs.”<sup>92</sup> In my interview with the Kyrgyz writer and journalist Choyun Ömüraliev (see Chapter 6) noted the following:

There is a book written by al Bukhari (d. 924) titled “History of Bukhara.” It tells about the history of early Islam in Central Asia in the eighth to ninth centuries, and it describes its brutality. The book was written right at the time when these tragic events took place. Later, many facts were hidden and they lied, saying that Islam was adopted peacefully in Central Asia. In this way, Islam was adopted. People have been practicing it together with their native customs.

In other words there was much resistance towards Islam which brought different sets of beliefs, rules, and practices. Ömüraliev may be right in his further claim that he said during my interview: “Islam came to Central Asia with great force: “It was adopted by sword and fire and by eliminating personal names and the names of local places and rivers.” The popular saying “The Uzbeks became Muslim by the sword of the Eminent Ali” [the fourth caliph after Prophet Muhammad] *Özbekter Azireti Alinin kilichinan musulman bolgon* seems to contain some historical facts. There is a historical site of a large cemetery complex consisting of several mosques, tombs, and burial grounds located in the Kyrgyzstan side of the Ferghana Valley. This place is considered a second Mecca by the people living in the Ferghana Valley. Thousands of Central Asians who know about the place make regular pilgrims year around, especially during Kurban Ait, a Muslim holiday. In the past, the place was visited mostly by *khojas*, who claim to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad as well as by ethnic Uzbeks. However since recent years many ethnic Kyrgyz began making pilgrims to the *mazar* (shrine), too. Behind this popular sacred *mazar* called Safed Bulan lies a very tragic story about the arrival of Islam to Central Asia. According to a popular legend, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, one of

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<sup>92</sup> Op.cit.

the mayors of Medina named Muhammad Jalil arrived in the Ferghana Valley with twelve thousand soldiers. The local Turkic khan [probably the Karakhanids] gave his daughter to Muhammad Jalil in marriage and he, together with his people, submitted to Islam. The Arabs began spreading Islam by building mosques. However, the local khan had not accepted Islam in his heart. One day, during the Friday prayer, *juma namaz*, the local leaders got together and massacred all the Arabs during their prayer. The Arab Muslims had taken off all their arms and given their full attention to God. All together, the heads of exactly 2772 Arabs were beheaded. It is said that the local people had a different religious worldview and thus did not want to accept Islam. The wife of the murdered Muhammad Jalil had a servant who was a black woman. When the killing happened, she was not there. When she returned, she searched for her close ones among the slain men and began sorting the heads from the bodies and washed all them one by one. During this time, her black skin turned white, signifying that she was purified. And for that reason she got the name Safed (“white” in Persian) Bulan (“white” in Turkic/Mongolian). The mosque in which the Arabs were beheaded is called *kirgin mechit*, “Mosque of Massacre” and the place where the heads were buried is called *kalla khana*, “Head Room.” The servant girl Safed Bulan was also buried there even though in Islam a woman cannot be buried at the cemetery designated for men. According to the legend, one of the wives of Muhammad Jalil had been left pregnant. And after forty years, the son of Muhammad Jalil, Shah Fazil came back to the Ferghana Valley and completed his father’s mission to bring Islam to the local people. He did it by force. Shah Fazil died there and his body was buried next to the 2772 Arab *shahits*, martyrs.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Today this historical site is considered an architectural memorial complex belonging to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

This very tragic event rejects the common assumption that the arrival of Islam to Central Asia was peaceful, but was received with much resistance and hostility. Therefore, the Islamization of Central Asian Turkic peoples was a very long and complex process and it requires further research on the early period of Islamization of Central Asian Turkic peoples, including the Kyrgyz.

The above historical event took place in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and today all the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, including the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz consider themselves Muslim. It is said that during the Soviet period, some people secretly buried their relatives close to the cemetery of those Arab martyrs. Today it is quite ironic that Kyrgyz, who are now Muslim, worship the shrines of Arab Muslims not knowing that it might as well have been their ancestors who killed them.

Most of the primary historical sources about the arrival and adoption of Islam in Central Asia come from their sedentary neighbors with whom the nomadic Mongols and Turks interacted for many centuries. Persian historical writings by Ata Malik Juvaini and Rashid Ad-Din, Chinese annals and travel accounts of European missionaries, e.g. William Rubruck and Plano Carpini give some general information about the Mongol religious beliefs. Juvaini and Rashid Ad-Din, two learned Persian men, shared a common Islamic background and personal experience in the service of the Mongol Khans of the 13th and 14th centuries. They devoted their lives to the recording of the history of the Mongol period. Rashid Ad-Din's *Jami at-Tavarikh* (World History)<sup>94</sup> and Juvaini's

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Since the site is officially located on Kyrgyzstan's territory, it is considered a national treasure of Kyrgyzstan and major restoration of the tomb of Shah Fazil and other *mazars* are taking place.

<sup>94</sup> Rashid-Ad-Din. *Sbornik letopisei*. Vol. 1, Parts 1-2. Moscow, Leningrad: The Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1952.

*Tarikh-i Jahangushay* (The History of the World Conqueror)<sup>95</sup> are two main primary sources that give us some valuable information about shamanism as practiced by nomadic Mongols/Turks. Almost all accounts, including those of Rubruck and Carpini, discuss the role of *qam(s)*, i.e., shamans and *yaychi(s)*, i.e., “rain maker(s)” among the Mongols.<sup>96</sup> The *qam(s)* are also mentioned in *The Secret History of the Mongols*.<sup>97</sup> Carpini wrote that the *qams* identified for the Mongol khans which days are favorable and not favorable for carrying out certain tasks, most importantly, military campaigns.<sup>98</sup> *Qam(s)*, who were also healers, were very much respected by the Mongol khans who considered them as their advisors. *Yaichi(s)* also existed among the Central Asian Turkic peoples with the same name (Kirghiz: *jaychi*), and they functioned in the same way as the Mongol *yaichi(s)*. One can read about them in the Kirghiz epic *Manas*. *Yaichis* were asked to practice their magic during the Mongols’ attacks on their enemies. By using their big kettledrums or special small blue rocks, they were able to call up heavy storms and strong winds to destroy their enemies without fighting. The significance of pre-Islamic beliefs such as rainmaking for Mongols as well as for Turks, including their rulers, tells us that Islam in 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Central Asia was not yet adopted fully by the nomadic Turks who shared common religious and cultural values with the nomadic Mongols. Many travelers noted in the past that the nomadic Mongol or Turkic women were more open-minded and freer than Muslim women who covered their face and avoided men.

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<sup>95</sup> Juvaini, 'Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik. *The History of the World Conqueror*. Translated from the text of Mirza Muhammad Qazvini by John Andrew Boyle. 2 vols., Oxford Road, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958.

<sup>96</sup> *The Mongol Mission*. Trans. by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey. Ed. by Christopher Dawson. London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955. pp. 9-14..

<sup>97</sup> Cleaves, Francis W. *The Secret History of the Mongols*. London, England; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University of Press, 1982.

<sup>98</sup> *The Mongol Mission*, p. 12.



Some wrote with surprise and praise about the nomadic Kazakh and Kyrgyz women erecting and dismantling the yurt by themselves and riding horses next to their men.

Carpini (13<sup>th</sup> century) describes quite elaborately almost every aspect of the Tatar people and their culture, but he does not mention any Islamic practices among Tatar Mongols or Turks. Together with the geographical landscape, military training and war strategies, he gives valuable information about nomads and their character, clothes, food, family structure, the yurt, native beliefs, taboos, and funeral rites that were not related to Islamic religious practices. Rashid Ad-Din and Juvaini both mention the important customs of the Mongols over and over, e.g., the ritual of passing between the two fires.<sup>99</sup> Everybody, including ambassadors, regardless of his faith had to follow this practice before having an audience with the khans. It was meant to purify the person from evil and harmful spirits.<sup>100</sup> Carpini's account of this custom is valuable, as it tells us about the spiritual nature of Mongol khans. Another important belief of the Mongols constantly stressed by Carpini and Rubruck is the sacredness of the threshold.<sup>101</sup> In Turkic and Mongol culture, one should not step or lean onto the threshold of a yurt (hous).

In *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition*,<sup>102</sup> DeWeese analyzes the Islamization of Turkic-Mongol nomads in the the Golden Horde and discusses the main character Baba Tükles in conversion narratives. Baba Tükles is believed to be the first

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>100</sup> The legacy of this old ritual still remains among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz: when a new bride comes to her husband's house for the first time, she throws a piece of fat as an offering for the "mother fire." This in turn symbolizes her acceptance or incorporation into a new family.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> DeWeese, Devin A. *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

bearer of Islam who brought the religion to the 14<sup>th</sup> century Golden Horde.<sup>103</sup> Later, it is argued, his Islamizing role was associated in popular memory with the roles of sacred ancestors like shamans or Sufis. Various Turkic peoples of the Golden Horde such as the Noghays, Tatars, Bashkirs, Qaraqalpaks, Kazakhs, and Uzbeks claim Baba Tükles as their mythic ancestor and revered him as a saint by creating shrines for him. Kazakh shamans used the spirit of Baba Tükles as their ancestral spirit by incorporating him into their shamanic practices.<sup>104</sup> He was also known among the Sufi shaykhs of 17<sup>th</sup> century Bukhara. Thus, DeWeese is convinced the conversion narratives are central to understanding the Islamization of the nomadic Turkic-Mongols of the Golden Horde and thus play a central role in creating various tribal, ethnic or national communities and identities in Central Asia.<sup>105</sup>

DeWeese identifies three kinds of the narratives about Baba Tükles that were told and recorded between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries: a) Conversion of Özbek Khan to Islam; b) Tatar literary accounts which try to show Baba Tükles' "Islamizing" role while stressing his ancestry of Edigu, who is considered to be the founder of the Noghay confederation.<sup>106</sup>

The author notes that the earliest Arabic account of the conversion of Golden Horde rulers is from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and tells the story of how Berke khan together with his army converted to Islam. DeWeese found the theme of this legend in several historical accounts. The 13<sup>th</sup> century legend describes how Berke as a child refused to drink his mother's milk or eat any food until he was nursed by a Muslim woman. This

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>105</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

conversion theme must have been so common that we even find it in the Kyrgyz oral epic *Manas*. In *Manas*, the hero Almambet, who becomes Manas's companion, is a Kalmyk,<sup>107</sup> whom the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kyrgyz considered a *kapir*, (< Ar. *Qufr*), "non-believer." In the epic, when Almambet is born, he refuses to suckle his mother's breast and later tries to convert his parents to Islam. He is expelled from his own people and comes to Manas.<sup>108</sup>

In an attempt to prove his argument that Islamization did matter for the nomadic peoples of the Golden Horde, DeWeese makes a good point by connecting the Islamic ancestor figure Baba Tükles with that of the traditional notion of the ancestor cult. It is this distinctive communal or ancestral aspect, DeWeese argues, that characterizes the essence of Central Asian Islam. DeWeese ties the role of Baba Tükles into the indigenous shamanic ancestor cult quite well. Even though the figure of Baba Tükles is not found among the Turks such as Kyrgyz, Altays, and Teleuts who were less affected or not affected by Islam, by giving some important examples from their chief spiritual values, such as fire-worship, he is able to show the importance of the ancestor cult which he ties in with the ancestor role of Baba Tükles, who brought Islam to various Turkic peoples. Thus, the fact that these various Turkic peoples acknowledge the Muslim saint as their communal ancestor is considered to be legitimate argument for the assimilation of Inner Asian and Islamic values.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Kalmyks are Mongols who were migrated to the region north of the Caucasus in the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>108</sup> In a traditional way, by suckling Manas' mother's breast, Almambet becomes a milk-brother (emchektesh) of Manas.

<sup>109</sup> DeWeese, p. 6.

To show how the role or figure of Baba Tükles is similar to that of a shaman, DeWeese discusses three main elements in the conversion narrative.<sup>110</sup> When Baba Tükles (BT) comes to the court of Özbek Khan to convert him and his people to Islam, the Khan organizes a fire pit contest between BT and his shamans. He tells them that whoever among them comes out alive from the fire pit will prove the power of his religion and he, i.e., Özbek Khan will adopt that person's faith. The Khan's shaman gets burned in the fire and dies immediately, but BT comes out alive and much stronger. The elements of this scene are compared by DeWeese to the shamanic initiation practices. First, the act of putting on the protective "armor" by BT is an act similar to that of putting on a shamanic costume by an Inner Asian shaman. The second act of entering the fire pit is parallel to a prospective shaman's submission to the initiation ritual. And the final act of BT's three companions, who pray for him while he is in the fire pit, amounts to the shaman's appeal to his guiding master spirits or ancestor spirits.

Although these conversion narrative legends seem to show convincingly that Islam among the nomadic Turks was not nominal, because their narrative stories always make Baba Tükles' religious power stronger than shamanic beliefs, they do not, however, as the DeWeese himself concedes, reflect what actually happened, but how Islam "was understood to have happened" among the nomadic groups.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 22.

## Sufism: Ancestor and Saint Veneration in Central Asian Culture

The ancient cities of Central Asia such as Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khiva were the centers of Islamic learning and written culture since medieval times and produced many well-known Muslim scholars, poets, and writers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina, Al-Khorezmi, Al-Beruni, Bukhari, Alisher Navoi, etc. Sufism was also popular in the region and Sufi *shayks* had close relationships with urban rulers in Central Asia such as Amir Timur, who ordered a beautiful tomb to be built for Ahmad Yasawi, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint.<sup>112</sup>

The Sufi practice of *dzikr* (remembrance of God) persisted the Soviet ban on religious activities in the Islamic cities such as Bukhara, Samarqand, and Khiva. Some groups of Uzbeks secretly continued to practice *dzikr*. Since institutionalized Sufism was more common in Uzbekistan, Uzbek scholars are much more knowledgeable than Kyrgyz and Kazakhs scholars about Sufism, especially about the Naqshbandiyya order which was founded in Uzbekistan in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Bukhara. The tomb of its founder Bahauddin Naqshbandi, located near Bukhara, remains a sacred site for worship. According to Buehler, the Turkic nomads did not appreciate institutional Sufism or urban Islam, which was not suitable for nomadic cultures because it required building permanent Sufi lodges as well as mosques, madrasah, etc. Instead, Sufism was spread to nomads by traveling *mullahs*, Sufis, and *ishons*. This group of religious men always had distinct religious and ethnic identities among the nomadic Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Uzbeks, who treated them with respect as well as skepticism. Muslim saints appear in epic songs as holy men.

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<sup>112</sup> Buehler, Arthur. *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet. The Indian Naqshbadiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shayk*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.p. XVII.

Upon adoption of Islam, funerals and memorial feasts among the nomadic Kyrgyz required the participation of a mullah or imam to carry out certain religious rites. Mullahs earned most of their living by offering their religious service at funerals and memorial feasts as well as by practicing healing through Quranic recitations and making protective charms, *tumar*. In other words, the people spoiled their mullahs with gifts and animals and they became used to receiving payment in different forms. We find the following lines from the above-mentioned Memorial Feast for K k t y Khan when Bokmurun offers his father's *ash*:

Moldolor d n y  b l sh p,  
Oshondo da talash p  
Mushtash p j r p  l sh p.<sup>113</sup>

The mullahs divide the treasure [gifts]  
And even then they fight;  
They fight so much they kill each other.

According to recent studies on Sufism among the Kyrgyz, there were two groups of Sufis called “ak takiyaluular” and “kara takiyaluular,”<sup>114</sup> “those with a white cap” and “those with a black cap.” It is said that these two groups of Sufis fought against each other and created religious confusion among the nomadic Kyrgyz. It is said that the Kyrgyz belonged to the white-capped ones.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *Manas. K rg z elinin baatirdik eposu (Manas. The Heroic Epic of the Kyrgyz People)*, Version by Saginbay Orozbekov, Vol. 3, Moskva: Nauka, 1990, p. 48.

<sup>114</sup> Notes from Asan Saipov's lecture about the adoption of Islam by the Kyrgyz. Institute of Islam, Bishkek, 2003.

<sup>115</sup> Until now many Kyrgyz elderly men wear a *takiya*, not white but black or dark green or blue under their *tebetei*, fur hat or *kalpak* hat made from white felt. I remember my great grandfather always wearing his black *takiya* when he prayed. If a person does not drink any alcoholic beverage, they say *Sopu bolup kaldingbi*, “Since when have you become a Sufi?” Or *Kojodoy koldop* “venerating someone like a *khoja*.” Or *Moldo bolup kaliptir* “He became a mullah,” i.e., very quiet and well behaved.

There are many popular proverbs and sayings about the Muslim clergy among the Central Asians. Some of these proverbs are quite clear in meaning, but some of them require an explanation of their social context. These sayings attest to the fact that Muslim clergy generally had a negative reputation among the people. The saying, *Moldonun aitkanin kil, kilganin kilba*, “Do what a *mullah* says, don’t do what he does,” implies that a *mullah* tells people to do good things, but he himself does bad or inappropriate things which are against Shari’a. Another popular Central Asian saying goes *Ölöngdiiü jerde ögüz semiz, ölük köp jerde moldo semiz*, “An ox gets fat where there is much grass, a *mullah* gets fat where there is much death.” In other words, a *mullah* receives payments in different forms at each funeral where he recites the *janaza* prayer for the dead. *Ishengen kojong suuga aksa, aldi-aldingdan tal karma*, “If your most trusted *khoja* is carried away by a river, then you should all grab onto a willow tree.” This means that one should not rely on a *khoja* all the time, but rely on oneself.

The presence of many Sufi religious terms demonstrate that Islam came to the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz through Sufi dervishes from sedentary regions of Central Asia. They transmitted basic religious knowledge and wisdom of the Prophet Muhammad in oral form mostly through poetry. Since oral poetry was highly valued among the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, their poets incorporated new Sufi/Persian poetic genre *san’at-nasihah* (<Pers./Ar.) into their existing traditional poetic genre called *terme*.<sup>116</sup> The development of the *nasihat* poetry is said to be related with the “Quranic principle that supports the moral autonomy of the individual” who can give “sincere advice (*nasihah*),

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<sup>116</sup> The term comes from the Turkic verb *ter-* “to select; to pick; to collect.” Oral poets improvised poetic lines consisting of 7-8 syllables. In their *terme* poetry, poets selected short, clear, and wise words to sing about life, time, nature, good and bad, young and old, women and men, child, etc.

which entitles everyone to advise and to alert a fellow citizen, including the head of the state and his officials.”<sup>117</sup> This group of poets wrote and composed wisdom poetry, *kazaldar* (influenced by Persian *ghazals*) filled with many Islamic and Sufi religious ideas and values.<sup>118</sup> The literary development of this poetic genre, which became very popular during the spread of Islam and Sufism in Central Asia in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century, remains largely unexplored by scholars. Most of the recent publications of Kyrgyz scholars on this genre contain mostly collections of *sanat-nasiyat* poetry or *kazals* with very little comparative analysis. Soviet scholars named this group of poets *zamanachi akindar*, because they wrote and sang about changing times, mainly referring to the Russian colonial rule in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They composed philosophical and religious songs about life in this and the other worlds and gave reasons for natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. These poets and their *kazal* poetry prove that they were also influenced by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim reformist movements, which were taking place in other parts of the Muslim world.<sup>119</sup>

There are many pious Muslim figures and Sufi saints whom the Central Asians hold sacred. An important religious figure in Islam is a man named al-Khidr, whose image became popular among the Central Asian Muslim nomads. The Kyrgyz have a

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<sup>117</sup> Kamali, Mohammad Hashim, “The Interplay of Revelation and Reason in the Shariah.” In: *Oxford History of Islam*. Edited by John, L. Esposito. Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 148.

<sup>118</sup> *Moldo Kilich* (1866-1917). *Kazaldar*. Compiled by Omor Sooronov, Frunze (Bishkek): “Adabiyat,” 1991.

*Kaligul* (1785-1855). *Kazaldar*. Ed. by K. Jusupov and compiled by Sh. Ümötaliev, K. Edilbayev, and T. Abdilov, Bishkek: Ala-Too journal, 1992.

Artstanbek (1828-1878). *Poems*. Bishkek: Kyrgyz entsiklopediyasi, 1994.

*Kyrgyz el irchilari* (Kyrgyz People’s Poets). Compiled by Batma Kebekova, Bishkek, 1994.

<sup>119</sup> During the Soviet period, these poets were condemned as being “bourgeois-nationalists” or “Muslic fanatics” who prevented people from progressing towards socialism or communism. During the early years of Soviet nation building, pupils of these poets had to change the content of this traditional poetry filled with Islamic religious and *Sufi* ideas, and they were ordered to compose songs about Lenin, Stalin, and the “Great October Revolution” and ridicule their old teachers, in particular the *Sufis* and *mullahs*.



saying or wish, *Jolung shidir bolsun, joldoshung Kidir bolsun!* which means “May your road be smooth and your companion be *Kidir!*” This is said for those who set out on a long journey. According to Cornell, even though in Islam Muhammad is the final Prophet, it was believed that “divine inspiration could remain accessible to believers even after Muhammad’s death.”<sup>120</sup> In Islam that divine inspiration is symbolized by the figure of al-Khidr (The Green One), who is described as “an unnamed servant of God and companion of the Prophet Musa (Moses).”<sup>121</sup> We also find the strong presence of Sufism, and saints like al-Khidr in the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*. In one of the main versions sung by the well-known singer Sayakbay Karalaev (1894-1971), the singer describes Manas’ ancestors, and associates their greatness and merit with Sufi holy men.

His forefathers were all khans,  
Blessed by *Kidir* from the beginning,  
His ancestors were all khans,  
Blessed by *Kidir* from the beginning.  
In places where they had stayed overnight  
Sacred shrines were built, for  
God had blessed them from the beginning.  
In the places where they had passed by  
A city with a bazaar was established, for  
God had blessed them from the beginning.  
They had exchanged greetings with twenty Sufi masters,  
Learned writing from a caliph,  
And they thus were called great “sahibs.”<sup>122</sup>

Many Russian travelers and ethnographers, including the native Kazakh ethnographer Chokan Valikhanov, who collected ethnographic materials from the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, all pointed out the fact that Islam did not play a significant role in their everyday lives. People were aware of some rules of Islamic *Shari’a*, but they

<sup>120</sup> Kamali, Mohammad Hashim, p. 66.

<sup>121</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>122</sup> *Manas, Kirgiz elinin baatirdik eposu*. Version by Sayakbay Karalaev, Vol. 1, Bishkek: Kirgizstan, 1995, p. 22.

most often did not observe them. Although they considered themselves Muslim by the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, their religious or spiritual practices and rituals often had nothing to do with Islam. However, Privratsky is very skeptical of Valikhanov's treatment of his Kazakh people's religion as "survivals of shamanism" or "nature religion."<sup>123</sup> As Privratsky notes, Valikhanov was trained in the Russian academy and thus very much influenced by Enlightenment ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and coming from this background, Valikhanov purposefully ignored the Islamic elements of Kazakh culture and chose to speak only about pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices.

Similarly, native post-Soviet scholarship tends to undermine the significance of Islam in Kyrgyz history and culture. As Devin DeWeese notes, because of many pre-Islamic/"shamanic" religious beliefs and practices, many of which still persist among the contemporary Central Asian Turkic Muslims, Central Asian scholars and elite have "ignored or dismissed or underestimated the Islamic component of their 'national' culture in an effort to highlight the specifically 'Turkic' or, for example Qirghiz [Kyrgyz], component of the civilization of which they are the current bearers."<sup>124</sup> In Chapter 6, I will discuss the issue of why most native scholars and intellectuals ignore or underestimate the Islamic component of their Kyrgyz or Turkic national heritage.

In *Muslim Turkestan: Kazakh Religion and Collective Memory*, Bruce Privratsky examines the degree of Kazakh "Muslimness" by offering detailed analyses of the Kazakh version of Islamic/Sufi religious values in the city of Turkistan. Many Central

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<sup>123</sup> Privratsky, G. Bruce. *Muslim Turkestan: Kazakh Religion and Collective Memory*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001, pp. 17-18.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Asians consider Turkistan a “Second Mecca,”<sup>125</sup> because the well-known 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint, Qoja Ahmad Yasawi, was born and buried there. Privratsky did extensive fieldwork research primarily among the Turkestani *khojas*, but he applies his findings to all Kazakhs. He uses his theory of “collective memory” and asserts that almost all religious beliefs, values, customs, and practices, which have been claimed before as native Kazakh (or shamanic) in fact come from Islam or Sufism. Privratsky concludes: “Kazakh religion is a collective memory in two ways. First, it commemorates the Kazak ancestors as a Muslim people. Secondly, it depends on the social memory of family and friendship networks eating together.”<sup>126</sup> However, he goes too far in his attempt to prove that all current religious behaviors and beliefs of Kazakhs are rooted in Islamic or Sufi traditions and practices. For example, he suggests that the “cultural origin” of the popular Kazakh (and Kyrgyz) term of endearment “*Aynalayin* (Kazak)/*aylanayin* (Kyrgyz),” i.e., “I will turn around you (in an act of self-sacrifice),” which is used mostly by the elderly towards the young, is related with “the self giving devotion to the saint and his memory” and with the Sufi practice of *dzikr* where the dervishes whirl in remembrance of God.<sup>127</sup>

It needs to be added that *aylanayin* is the most endearing term used in Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages, but there are many other similar terms that are used interchangeably with it. These terms also describe different physical movements of a person. As Privratsky notes correctly, the term *aylanayin* “invokes the memory of a healing rite” of a shaman in Inner Asia.<sup>128</sup> In this practice where a shaman circled (*aylan-*) around the yurt in which a sick person or child was placed. Other popular Kyrgyz terms of endearment

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>128</sup> Op.cit.

that are similar to *aylanayin* are *kagilayin* (*kak-* to shake off; *kagil-* to shake oneself) and *sogulayin* (*sok-* to hit; *sogul-* to hit oneself against something [the ground]). Sufi dervishes do not perform such movements, but a shaman does. Privratsky concentrates his analysis mostly on Islamic elements of Kazakh religious practices, but ignores the un-Islamic or native elements, for example in the healing rites. He is right that the rite of *dem salu* (“putting” the breath into the body of the sick person) by a mullah is a common practice among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.<sup>129</sup> However, he does not describe fully the rite of *joyuu* (from *joy-* to eliminate [bad spirits]), which is done when a bad spirit enters the body. Kyrgyz and Kazakhs say *kirne kirdi*, which Privratsky translates as “inserts.”<sup>130</sup> *Joyuu* is very common among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz and is usually done by a *bakshī*, healer who uses *kūil* (ash) as main ingredient in cleansing the spirit of the sick. Professional or powerful healers usually begin yawning constantly when they are around a person or child who is not feeling well.<sup>131</sup>

What makes Central/Inner Asian Islam distinct from other Muslim communities in the world is this “ancestral complex” which persisted and still persists “most strongly after the adoption of Islam.”<sup>132</sup> Often, ordinary Kyrgyz do not and cannot distinguish which of their religious activities are Islamic and which are non-Islamic. This is because

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>131</sup> When I was growing up in the mountains, we did not have a healer, so my grandmother would eliminate the bad spirits from my body whenever I felt sick. Like a *bakshī*, she would take a cup of ash, cover it with a piece of cloth and begin her healing by moving her hand in which she held the cup of ash in a circular motion above my head, then she would move to my shoulders, back, chest, arms and legs and saying: *Menin kolum emes Umay enenin kolu. Chik! Chik! Chik! It-mishiktarga bar, uuru-kaskilerge bar, jaman orustarga bar! Menin balamda emneng bar?!* “These are not my hands but Umay<sup>131</sup> the Mother. Get out! Get out! Get out! Go to the cats and dogs, go to the thieves and hooligans, and to the evil Russians! What are you doing in my child’s body?!” I think this kind of healing has a psychological effect on the sick person. I would feel better after my grandmother’s healing.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

Islamic ideas became conceptualized and deeply integrated into the local religious values and rituals. Kyrgyz strongly believe it is their sacred duty as Kyrgyz to recite or dedicate the Quran to honor their deceased ancestor(s). In other words, the ancestral spirits became “Islamized.” DeWeese questionis the validity of a one directional way of viewing the “Islamization” of Central Asian nomads.

We must acknowledge first off that the process signified by the unfortunate inelegant term “Islamization” is in reality a dual process that necessarily works in two different directions: on the one hand the introduction of Islamic patterns into Inner Asia involves the “imposition” of Islamic norms in a new setting, an alien environment; on the other hand, the nativization of Islamic patterns involves their incorporation and assimilation into indigenous modes of thought and action.<sup>133</sup>

Central Asian Muslims recite Quranic prayers in Arabic (often without knowing what they really mean), and dedicate these holy verses to the spirit of their deceased parent(s), sibling(s), relatives, and ancestors in general. At the end of a Quranic recitation, the Kyrgyz say: *Atam Köchümkuldun/(ötkön-kertkenderdin) arbagına/soobuna bagishtadım*, “I dedicate [this prayer and food] to the spirit or good merit of my father Köchümkul (or to all those [people] who have passed away/departed from this world.”) It is important to point out that when we say “ancestor veneration” it does not only imply one particular ancestor, but also close and distant deceased family members.

People believe in the ancestral spirit’s strong power to bring misfortune to an individual, family or community if the ancestors are not remembered, respected, and offered the proper memorial feasts (*beyshembilik, kirqi, jildik, ash* discussed in Chapter 5) and rituals accompanied by a recitation from the Quran. One of the common

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

traditional curses among the Kyrgyz is *Arbak ursun!/Arbak urgur!*,<sup>134</sup> “May the deceased’s spirit hit (curse) him/her/you!” Another saying is *Kuday urgan ongolot, arbak urgan ongolboit*, “One who is cursed by God will recover (i.e., will have another chance in life), but one who is cursed by a (an ancestral) spirit will never recover (his bad deed will not be forgiven),” demonstrating that nomadic Kyrgyz believed in the spiritual power of the ancestors or deceased family member. Therefore, most Kyrgyz do not feel guilty if they do not pray five times a day or do not fast during the holy month of Ramadan. But they fear God, (Arabic *Allah*, or Persian *Quday*) and the *ata-babalar din arbagi* (ancestral spirit) and feel compelled to carry out periodic offerings of various forms by sacrificing animals paying homage to their *arbak(s)*. Thus, ancestral spirits have an equal, not lesser, power than God. DeWeese confirms this idea in his following statement:

A natural and vital focus of such religious life, designed to maintain and promote life and well-being, falls naturally upon the Ancestors, who are the key to the community’s health and well-being as protectors not only of the family’s stock and lineage, but of its economic foundations as well . . . More important, the ancestral spirits, are a central focus of the most common and most sacred religious practice among Inner Asian peoples; for the vast majority of individuals and communities, religious life lies primarily not in recourse to a shaman or “worship” of some deity, but in the periodic offerings to the ancestral spirits in the various forms, intended to preserve the health and continuity of the family and community.<sup>135</sup>

The majority of Kazakhs and Kyrgyz (and even some Uzbeks, who are said to be more devout Muslims) do not know the basic five pillars of Islam. People utter Persian and Arabic words for God i.e., *Quday* or *Allah*. They recite *surahs* and prayers from the

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<sup>134</sup> The term *arbaq* (Kyrgyz)/*aruaq* (Kazakh) is the plural form of Arabic “ruh” i.e., spirit is right in saying that the Turks lost their native word for spirit. The nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs are not familiar with the Mongol term for spirit *ongon*. Privratsky, p. 148.

<sup>135</sup> DeWeese., p. 37.

Quran without knowing what they mean. Their prayers are in Arabic but the goal is to honor the spirit of their dead relatives and ancestors and ask for their support instead of worshipping Allah only. Therefore, our main task should lie not just in proving that the nomads, e.g. Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, identify themselves with Islam because their epics or legends give a lot of credit to Islam, but rather in studying their mixed or hybrid national or ethnic identity which developed under the two socio-cultural and religious systems of beliefs: Islam and “shamanism,” which is now being replaced with the term *Tengirchilik* (*Tengrianstvo* in Russian, *Tengrianity* in English).

In addition, in analyzing such oral legends and epics containing Islamic elements, it is necessary to take into consideration the religious and cultural background of those people who wrote or told conversion tales such as Baba Tükles. Most often, it is the outsiders, in this case perhaps Muslim missionaries or Sufis from Persia and Arabia, who legitimized their own religious belief over another pagan system. There is no doubt about the significance of Islam in people’s identity as a Muslim in Central Asia. However, it is not the main or the only marker of Kyrgyz identity as a nation, ethnic group, tribe, or individual. Islamic beliefs and values have been used interchangeably with their ancient customs, rituals and worldview in general. We would be mistaken to claim that nothing of the old or native beliefs was left after the adoption of Islam as Privratsky seems to apply.

In examining the history of Islamization of Central Asian nomads, scholars like Thomas Allsen propose the process of “selective borrowing” of beliefs and practices from Islam and adoption of Islamic values, and their relation to and incorporation into

pre-Islamic indigenous religious system. In the context of his study on commodity exchange in the Mongol Empire, Thomas Allsen concludes that

. . . nomads, like all other peoples do not borrow randomly, but selectively by filtering new, external elements through their own cultural norms and aspirations. This process, known as re-identification to psychologists and anthropologists, is one of the principal mechanisms by which culture is transmitted, modified, and rejected. Whenever individuals or cultures encounter a new phenomenon, there is a pronounced tendency to place it into an established category, that is, to identify the new with something already familiar from experience.<sup>136</sup>

Providing existing cultural context for adopting new or foreign culture and its religious elements helps us to understand the process of incorporation of Islamic beliefs and values. Specifically, it reveals why certain Islamic religious ideas and principles were and are more valued and practiced, and why others are “rejected” or “modified” according to local religious and socio-cultural values. As Allsen notes, Central Asian Turco-Mongol nomads and nomadic states/empires headed by rulers like Attila, Chingiz Qan and Amir Temir, possessed rich nomadic cultures with their own “cosmological precepts, aesthetic norms, and system of moral and economic values. And it was these indigenous worldviews and tastes that provided their criteria for borrowing when they encountered and surveyed the cultural riches of the sedentary world.”<sup>137</sup>

Thus, in order to understand which elements of Islamic religious values and principles were welcomed and easily incorporated into the nomadic Turkic native beliefs, and why, we need to find out first what were and are the most important religious norms and values in the lives of the nomads, both before and after the adoption of Islam.

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<sup>136</sup> Allsen, Thomas. *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire. A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 102.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.



In his book *Shamanstvo u narodov Srednei Azii I Kazaxstana*<sup>138</sup>, a well-known Russian scholar and ethnographer V. N. Basilov, tries to show the “Islamized shamanism” in Central Asia and how this mixed religion was kept and practiced among its practitioners. He presents very interesting material describing shamanism as practiced in the Islamic cities of Uzbekistan. Basilov bases his study on his own extensive fieldwork research at different times between 1968-1989 among various Central Asian ethnic groups, mostly the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Karakalpaks, and Kazakhs living in the outskirts of Tashkent. Basilov supplements his own findings by using the works of other scholars and ethnographers such as Andreev, Bogoraz, Shternberg, Tokareva, Sukhareva, and Balayielva who wrote about the role of Islam and pre-Islamic beliefs and “survival” among the Central Asian peoples.

Basilov presents numerous examples about how Central Asians’ previous shamanic practices and beliefs incorporated many of the Islamic/Sufi ideas. He saw traditional Uzbek and Kazakh singers and healers who attached a special *tumar* or talisman with Quranic verses in it to their instruments and drums. Their prayers and healing vocabulary contained most of the Muslim saints’ names and the word Allah. One of the most explicit incorporations of Sufi practices was the act of *zikh* which the Uzbeks and Tajiks called *jahr*. This practice was the main part of shamanic acts in the cities of Khorezm and Bukhara when healing a sick person. In the past, the shamans put the sick person in the center and danced and sang *bedik* songs around him/her. The singing of the *bedik* songs to the sick was practiced until the early 1920’s among the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz as well as among the Altay peoples. However, in more Islamic cities such as

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<sup>138</sup> Basilov, V. N. *Shamanstvo u narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*. Moskva: "Nauka", 1992.

Bukhara and Khorezm where the influence of Sufism was strong, the local shaman or healers adopted Sufi institutional practices such as the *zikh*. The majority of participants in *zikh* or *jahr* were women *bakshis*, healers and fortunetellers and they practiced the *jahr* in the evenings around 10 o'clock. As Basilov notes, despite the fact that shamanism and its practices were outlawed by the Islamic Shari'a, Central Asians quite interestingly incorporated many ideas and practices of Sufism.

This kind of religious syncretism, however, is not unique to the Muslims of Central Asia. Studies of religious syncretism in many peripheral Muslim countries show that "the more iconic practices of Islam—such as abstaining from eating pork, attending communal prayer, and observing Ramadan—coexist with an open invocation of the ancestors, magic and sorcery. In some places pilgrimage to sacred places is regarded as an acceptable substitute for the *hajj*, which is seen being seen as an Arab custom not required of "true" Muslims."<sup>139</sup>

In other words, Central Asian Islamic culture is different from other Muslim regions of the world in its distinct integration of native beliefs and practices. The coexistence of Islamic and native beliefs or their more "liberal" attitude to Islam might be one reason for calling the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz "nominal Muslims." The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are not likely to be offended if they are called nominal Muslims, for they themselves are aware of the fact that they do not observe basic rules of Islam as strictly as in other countries. For example, the consumption of alcohol is forbidden in Islam but the majority of Central Asians drink alcohol (this is mainly a legacy of

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<sup>139</sup> Lawrence, B. Bruce, "The Eastward Journey of Muslim Kingship." In: *Oxford History of Islam*. Edited by John, L. Esposito. Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 427.

Soviet/Russian rule). However, even before the introduction of vodka, people drank the ancient drink *koumiss*, fermented mare's milk. If consumed in large quantities *koumiss* has an intoxicating effect. The Muslim clergy did not or could not outlaw this drink among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs because it was their only seasonal summer drink in the mountains and, moreover, it also has many health benefits. As another example, according to Islamic burial traditions, a person should be buried within twenty-four hours after his/her death, but the Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz do not obey this rule; they keep the body at least one day, and in some cases two days, to wait for close family members to arrive. Islamic customs are usually applied to "formal" ceremonies such as rites of passage (marriage, circumcision, funeral rites, the latter will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5).

In sum, in interpreting Central Asian religious beliefs and customs one should always take into account the socio-cultural environment or context, i.e., nomadic or sedentary, under which they were developed and practiced. In this way we will get a fuller picture of peoples' religious lives, both Islamic and pre-Islamic. The first did not fully replace the latter for many socio-economic and ecological reasons. We need to ask which aspects of Islam were suitable for nomadic life and culture and which aspects of it were not? How did the nomadic people contextualize this foreign religion and integrate into their own culture and worldview?

Caroline Humphrey studies Inner Asian shamanism and its practices. Although she mostly deals with shamanism as practiced among various nomadic Mongols such as the Daur and Buryats, her recent research findings on shamanism provide valuable information to the understanding of the connection between Central Asian Turkic

shamanism and south Siberian shamanism, the latter being practiced by Mongols, Buryats, Daur, Altays and Teleuts. While DeWeese argues against the notion of nominal nomadic Muslims, the authors Humphrey and Onon argue against another common notion about the existence of a unified homogeneous shamanism in Inner Asia. Most of their discussion about various aspects of shamanism and its usage by the Daur Mongols can be applied to the case of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz and even to that of the Uzbeks and Turkmens who gave up most of their shamanic heritage for Islam.

Humphrey and Onon try to explore and expose the diversity of shamanism which, according to the authors, was practiced not just by one kind of shaman, but by several kinds of shamans, each specializing in various healing practices associated with different parts and kinds of the body and sicknesses. There was and still is no single shaman who is able to conduct all spiritual services and healing functions for the people. For example, the terms now used for various shamans are *otochi* (curer), *barishi* (bone-setter), *bariyachi*, (midwife), *kiyanchi* (sorcerer).<sup>140</sup> These specialists are also known with similar names among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. The *kiyanchi* would be equal to the *yaychi(s)* or storm causers mentioned in 13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> century accounts of western travellers. In some rural areas of Central Asia, if someone breaks a bone, he/she goes to a *sinikchi* (bone setter). There are not many left today.

Privratsky and other scholars like Humphrey are right in their assertion that shamans did not play a central role in people's everyday religious and spiritual life but participated at specific rituals such as healing the sick. It is not only western scholars who are finding the term shamanism irrelevant to describe the native beliefs of Turkic peoples,

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<sup>140</sup> *Shamans and Elders*, p. 51.

today many native scholars and intellectuals also opposing to the idea of using the term and proposing a different term, *Tengirchilik*, which will be discussed in Chapter 6.

As one of the leading scholars of Central Asian religious history Devin DeWeese notes “Like many other “aboriginal” religions, Central or Inner Asian native religion values “life” and “health” and most of their ritual practices involve “life-sustaining activities” which in turn requires the “crisis intervention” on the part of healers such as shamans.<sup>141</sup> Unfortunately, as mentioned above, many scholars, by incorrectly calling the Inner Asian religion “shamanism,” place the shaman and his/her ritual and healing activities in the very center of the Central/Inner Asian system of beliefs. Today, this view has lost its significance. New work by Caroline Humphrey, Urgunge Onon, Devin DeWeese and Kazakh and Kyrgyz scholars show that the “distinctive” and main focus of Inner Asian religious life is not the shaman, but “the *communal* and *ancestral* aspects” which make *life* possible.<sup>142</sup>

One of the main characteristics of the shamanic religion is the supreme God, called *Tengri* or *Kök*, Blue Sky. We find in Central Asian epics many references to *Tenri* (Kr. *Tengir*). Blessings such as *Tengir koldosun or Tengir jalgasin* (May *Tengri* support or bless you!) are still used by some elderly Kyrgyz. One of the powerful curses used in Kyrgyz epics as well as in ordinary life was the expression “*Töshü tüktüü jer ursun, töbösu achik kök ursun!*”, [“May you be cursed by Earth with a hairy chest and by *kök*, blue Sky with an open top!”] Here the Earth is likened to a human being as having a hairy chest: the trees or forests of Earth are considered the hair and the Sky is viewed as having

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<sup>141</sup> DeWeese, p. 13.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

no top. This popular curse in Central Asian oral literature clearly reflects people's ancient cosmology which holds Earth and Sky to be gods.

As Ömüraliev points out, the belief in one and only God was not new to the Central Asian nomadic peoples, but the idea of the Prophet was. The nomadic peoples also believed in the existence of one God and they had a name for it *Tängri/Tengir* (See Chapter 6). The physical presence of Islam reflected in mosques and *madrasahs* was missing in the steppes and mountains. Almost everything they did in their life depended on their livestock. They never stayed in one location for more than one or two months, but moved constantly from pasture to pasture in search of new grazing land. This factor alone prevented building mosques and *madrasahs* in the mountains. Despite differences in urban/rural settings, belief in *Tängri* aided islamization.

Recent ethnographic studies of Inner Asian religion have focused on another aspect of Inner Asian indigenous religion: the spirits of nature, mountains, trees, lakes and rivers. Many such sites are believed to be places where a human's, especially a shaman's death had occurred. This makes them sacred places to pray for the spirits of the dead, which are said to have become master spirits of certain mountains or trees.<sup>143</sup> In Inner Asia not just any mountain, tree or spring can be worshipped by people. The sites for worship are usually unusual places such as a lonely tree on a hilltop or in a valley or near a river or spring. Today, people who are facing personal problems, such as infertility or mental illness, continue to visit such sacred places including the *mazars* of Sufi saints to ask for their blessing and cure. They tie pieces of clothes to lonely trees and circle around the tree three times; those who can afford it usually sacrifice a sheep or goat to the

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<sup>143</sup> *Shamans and Elders*, p. 128.

spirits. Clearly, there was an existing cultural context for adopting a new and similar religious practice, such as the worship of Sufi saints and their *mazars*, shrines.

One explicit legacy of Sufism among the Central Asians is the practice of *ziyarat*, which in Arabic means “a visit for the purpose of giving greetings” and its association with the Muslim/Sufi saints, their tomb/shrine and similar sacred places with unusual landscapes.<sup>144</sup> In Sufi tradition, *ziyarat* was carried out by disciples of a Sufi *pir*, saint/master. There are many holy places, including the shrines of famous Sufi saints such as Bahauddin Naqshbandi in Bukhara and Qoja Ahmad Yasawi in Turkestan. Many place names carry the Turkic word *ata* or *baba* (father/ancestor) attached to the name of saints such as Arslan Bab(a), Qilishtī Ata, Ukasha Ata, Qumshiq Ata, Al-Qoja Ata, Qusshī Ata, and Oluya Ata in Kazakhstan), Kochkor Ata, Padisha-Ata, Iman-Ata, Cholpon Ata, Shüdügör Ata, etc. in Kyrgystan. In other words, as Privratsky notes “*ziyarat* is part of a larger complex of Kazakh [Central Asian] ancestral obligation, and the saints and shrines are inseparable from the ancestor cult.”<sup>145</sup> “And this association of two types of ancestors is one of the keys to understanding Kazakh or Central Asian religion.”<sup>146</sup>

### Islam in the Soviet Period.

The Islamization process of the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, which had been going on before, ceased soon after the Soviets established their rule in the region. During

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

the 1930's the Soviets forced the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs to become sedentary and to adopt the new Soviet life and secular/atheist education.

After WWII, all religious sites of worship and activities, both Islamic and Christian, such as mosques, churches, and *mazars* (shrines) were under strict state control. On November 28, 1958, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR issued a decree "About Taking Measures to Eliminate the Pilgrimages to so-called "Sacred Places." The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan (Kirgiziia) received regularly official reports from every raykoms (regional committee) and gorkoms (city committee). In his report sent to Comrade A.A. Nurullaev, Head of the Department of Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Counsel of USSR, S. Vishnyakov, Vice Councelor on Religious Affairs of Kyrgyz SSR writes:

As a result of the above taken measures, the number of the active "sacred places" and the pilgrimages to them have been decreased. Until 1958, i.e., before the well-known decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, there were about 300 "sacred places" on the territory of Kyrgyzstan,. . . today only 10 "sacred places" remain and the number of pilgrims decreased 9-10 times."<sup>147</sup>

For example, in 1967, during the month of August, about 2500 pilgrims came on a daily basis to the "sacred place" Taht-i-Suleyman in the city of Osh; in 1971, about 350 pilgrims visited the site, however in 1972 only about 200 people came. The similar situation applies to other religious places of worship such as Ayup-Paygambar [located on the Jalal-Abad resort in southern Kyrgyzstan].<sup>148</sup>

However, some "sacred places," such as "Tahti-Sulayman," "Sahabalar," "Ashir-Ata," "Khoja-Bilyar," "Arslanbob," "Ayup Paygambar," "Shah-Fazil," "Dul-Dul Ata," "Idiris Paygambar," "Pacha-Ata" are still attracting large number of peoples.... Due to the lack of control by the local authorities, *sheikhs*, *mullahs* and other representatives

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<sup>147</sup> "Report of S. Vishniakov, Vice Councelor on Religious Affairs of Kyrgyz SSR to Comrad A.A. Nurullaev, Head of the Department of Religious Affairs Under the Ministry of Counsel of USSR," July 24, 1973.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p. 2.



of religious clergy in various regions of Osh province are trying to revive or renew illegal activities at some “sacred places” such as “Akhun-Bobo” in the Laylak rayon, “Daud-Mazar” in Frunze rayon, “Bebechek” and “Kizil-Bulak Ata” in the Naukat rayon. .... Majority of so-called “sacred places” are located in picturesque places of vacations for workers to which during summer time hundreds of people come and therefore, it is difficult to differentiate the vacationers from the pilgrims.<sup>149</sup>

In order to find out whether these sacred places were the real burial grounds of saints, Soviets started to excavate the places.<sup>150</sup>

Similar reports were sent from regional administrators to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan. By the 1970s, the number of believers both Muslim and Christian, decreased tremendously in the country. In 1967, 555 religious societies and groups functioned in Kyrgyz SSR with the total number 130 thousand active members. By 1973, 313 religious societies and groups remained with 100 thousand active members. In the following couple of years the number of religious organizations was reduced to 25 societies and groups.<sup>151</sup>

During the years 1978-1979, the Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kirgiz SSR took official measures and actions (meropriiatiia) to “Raise the Effectiveness of Atheistic Propaganda among the Population in the Kirghiz SSR.”<sup>152</sup> Secretaries of provincial (obkom), city (gorkom), and regional (raykom) communist parties conducted ideological works by cooperating with legislative committees of local Sovets (councils) of people’s deputies. Employees of ideological institutions and organizations of public education and secretaries of

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>152</sup> “Measures and Actions (meropriiatiia) About Raising the Effectiveness of Atheistic Propaganda Among the Population in the Kirghiz SSR between the Years 1978-1979.” Department of Propaganda and Agitation of Central Committee of Communist Party of Kirgiziia. pp. 1-4.

provincial, city, and regional *komsomol* (Committee of Soviet Youth) committees monitored the effectiveness of atheistic propaganda among the people.<sup>153</sup> A special brochure “as a help to a lecturer-atheist” was published in the two publishing houses “Kirgistan” and “Mektep.”<sup>154</sup> Perspective plan of “scientific-atheistic” works was worked out in regions where societies of religious sects functioned. There was a process of selecting and educating “ideological cadres” such as “lecturer-atheists, propagandist-agitators, political informants.”<sup>155</sup> The material basis of higher institutes of learning and vocational and general educational schools, houses of culture, clubs, health and children’s organizations had to be strengthened. Mass media and communications such as radio and televisions were used against the “illegal and anti-public activities of sects.” A monthly magazine titled “Atheist” was published. Various approaches were used towards religious societies and groups. It was necessary to consider each believer’s religious schooling, orientation, age, sex, education and profession. Works were conducted to protect children and youth from religious influences. Seminars were organized to give atheist education to Party, Soviet, and Komsomol and Union workers and activists, teachers, physicians, mentors of pioneers and preschool teachers, teachers and professors of schools and colleges, workers of cultural-enlightenment institutions, administrative organs, presidents and members of women’s councils, and parent committees. Annual production of films on atheist topics was anticipated. Literature and art also played a key role in atheist education. The religious celebrations had to be replaced by “unreligious” ones. Methodological manuals were prepared for schoolteachers which showed them how to

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>154</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>155</sup> Op.cit.

use various means of giving atheist education such as extracurricular class and school activities, which included “organizing circles and groups of young atheists, lectures, discussions, thematic evenings, excursions, cultural tours to movies, theaters etc.”<sup>156</sup>

In Soviet Kyrgyzstan, it was commonly believed that the Kyrgyz living in the south are more religious, i.e., more pious Muslims than the Kyrgyz in the north. This factor is due to the close historical connection of the southern Kyrgyz with the Kokand Khanate in the Ferghana Valley. And to a certain degree, this is true in most of the southern regions like Osh, Nookat, Kara-Suu, and Isfana, all of which share borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, countries that are considered to be more Islamic than Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Muratali Aji Jumanov, Muftiy of the Kyrgyz Republic, also acknowledged the above assumption that some southern regions of Kyrgyzstan observe Islam more closely. He notes that compared to ten years ago, *Shari'a* rules are being followed much better among the northern Kyrgyz. However, regarding the funeral rites, i.e., keeping the deceased body unburied for one or two days, all the Kyrgyz do “a very bad job.” “It is only a problem among the ethnic Kyrgyz” he points, “among the Uzbeks, Uighurs and Tajiks there is no such thing as keeping the body for a day.” It is true, Kyrgyz living in some of the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan such as Nookat, Kizil-Kiya, Kadam-Jay, and Batken, usually obey this rule. According to Jumanov it takes about a day to dig the grave, but people, especially in the north, keep the body unburied “for no reason” for two or three days. He mentions the bad legacy of Soviet/Russian culture in Kyrgyz funeral customs:

Northerners [*tündüktöktör*] express their condolences to the deceased’s family by offering them vodka. They also use a tape recorder for *janaza* [a

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

prayer before the body is taken to the burial place] and a coffin to bury the body. Since 1998, however, these things are changing. Before that, people used to dress the deceased in a suit and tie and place in a coffin. Nowadays, they carry the body on a *tabit* [a flat wooden frame to carry the body] to the grave. During an official funeral service (for dignitaries), they wrap the body in a white shroud and only the face will be visible. And of course, there will be a yurt. As for the music, unfortunately, they still play Russian orchestra, but I think this will go away eventually.

Together with these Russian/Soviet influences, Jumanov disapproves of Kyrgyz funerary customs such as *ökürüü*, the crying out loud by men, and singing of *koshoks* [lament songs] by women. He states: “Among the Kyrgyz there is a lot of wasting of money and disorder at funerals.” In the past, to eliminate these extra or un-Islamic practices, notes Jumanov, the *Muftiyat* had issued a decree banning the killing of animal(s) at funerals, but it did not help (see Chapter 5).

My hometown of Kizil-Jar, also shares its border with Uzbekistan. However, as was mentioned earlier, the Kyrgyz of the Aksı region are an exception, for they remained quite loyal to their language and traditional customs, especially funeral rites, which are specifically Kyrgyz or non-Islamic. Most of the southern regions, except Aksı, are inhabited mainly by the third major Kyrgyz tribal group called Ichkilik, who settled among and near the sedentary Uzbeks and Tajiks a long time ago. The Saruu Kyrgyz, who inhabited the mountains of the Aksı region, became sedentary only in the 1960s. They did not live with the Uzbeks long enough to be influenced by their language and culture, which have many Islamic elements. For various reasons, which I discussed in Chapter 3, intermarriage between the Uzbeks of the Ferghana Valley and the Aksı Kyrgyz almost does not take place.

One should also consider the fact that, unlike the Kyrgyz who lived in the urban cities and towns like Bishkek, İsik-Köl, Osh, Jalal-Abad, Tash-Komur, Kizil-Kiya etc., people in the countryside, where there existed no or a very small Russian population, spoke Kyrgyz both at home, at work or at school. Many city dwellers had almost forgotten their native Kyrgyz language and thus distanced themselves from Kyrgyz traditional values and customs, which had become foreign to them. There were very few Russian-speaking people in Kizil-Jar during the Soviet period and therefore, all Kyrgyz spoke Kyrgyz. Unlike the Ichkilik Kyrgyz in the Osh province, the Kyrgyz in Kizil-Jar kept their language clear from Uzbek influence. They can speak and understand Uzbek, because they watch Uzbek TV channels and listen to Uzbek music every day. Still, they have been able to preserve their language. They also considered themselves Muslim, but they did not follow the basic rules of the *Shari'a*. Alcohol is consumed a lot less or not at all among the Uzbeks and they bury their dead according to *Shari'a* rules. The funeral customs in the Aksı region, especially in Kizil-Jar are similar to those in northern Kyrgyzstan (see Chapter 5).

There was no mosque in Kizil-Jar before and during the Soviet period. There were no mosques in the mountains for the nomadic Kyrgyz either. There were few Kyrgyz *aksakals*, elderly men who knew how to write and read in Arabic script and carried out certain religious rituals. Kyrgyz nomads had only basic knowledge about Islam and Muslims' duties. The nomads' life depended on nature and their domestic and wild animals and therefore, they had to live in harmony with their surroundings by worshipping the God(s) and spirits of Nature. Yet, they considered themselves Muslim by carrying out the basic duties of a Muslim such as reciting the Quran for the spirits of

the deceased or ancestors; praying five times a day (mostly done by elderly men and women); bringing a mullah for the deceased's final *janaza* prayer or for a *nike* (from Ar. *nikoh*) marriage ceremony.

When the Kyrgyz nomads in the southern region of Aksı were forced to settle down in Kızıl-Jar and take up agriculture in 1950s, they encountered the Soviet Communist ideology, which disregarded most of their traditional beliefs and practices, including Islamic ones, as remnants of the dark ages, and preached atheism to them. Thus people in Kızıl-Jar did not really experience a mosque-centered religious life. Young Kyrgyz and Russian Communists, who were trained in official Soviet schools and programs, were sent out to the *sovkhoses* [state farms] and *kolkhozes* [collective farms] to help to enforce the Soviet power. Teachers began preaching atheism to schoolchildren. Traditional funeral rites (see Chapter 5), especially the killing of animals for the deceased, were strictly forbidden. Circumcision by a traditional specialist was also prohibited; only doctors were allowed to do it, but many people called in a traditional practitioner and secretly carried out the circumcisions in their homes. Marriage was only valid if registered by the state not by a mullah. Some teachers, who believed in God, preached atheism to their students, but asked for God's forgiveness as soon as they stepped out of the classroom.

I remember, each year we used to commemorate the birthday of Rinat Gadiyev, who had died in the Afghan war when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Rinat Gadiyev was the son of one of the Tatar teachers at our school. Every year in spring, the school would organize an official memorial where teachers and Gadiyev's mother gave speeches about him. After that all of us pioneers and *komsomols*, dressed in our white and

black uniforms and wearing our *galstuki* (red scarves), and *znachki* (pins with a picture of the young Lenin), would march in a long column carrying flowers and wreathes to Rinat Gadiev's grave. After placing flowers on Gadiev's grave, some of our Kyrgyz teachers would remain behind to recite the Quran to other Kyrgyz deceased people buried in that cemetery. They were afraid to do this in front of their students, so they asked us to go ahead of them. It was dangerous for government officials and teachers to show or express one's religious beliefs openly, as the number one tools in disseminating Soviet ideology and atheist propaganda.

However, the Kyrgyz in Kizil-Jar continued practicing many of their pre-Islamic and Islamic customs despite the official ban. The former Kyrgyz *sovkhos* director of Kizil-Jar told me how the officials tried to prohibit carrying out funeral rites among the Kyrgyz, especially slaughtering of an animal. He told me the following story:

At that time [during the Soviet period] one of our *aksakals* [white-bearded elderly man] named Anarbay, who lived on Mayli-Say Street, had passed away. Akbar [former *sel'sovet*, village counselor] and I went there and prevented people from killing a mare or sheep. The elderly men agreed not to slaughter any animals and left for somewhere. After a while they returned with a thigh of a newly slaughtered cow and said they had bought it from a butcher. They said that they did not kill any animal, but just bought regular meat to prepare meal for those guests who would be coming from far away places. We later learned they had slaughtered a cow. Yes, such things happened among the Kyrgyz....

It was easier to preserve traditional customs in the countryside than in the cities. People's religious or spiritual life in Kizil-Jar was centered around family, ancestor, tribe, or community-oriented practices rather than a mosque. Many "minor" religious practices and beliefs went unnoticed by state officials because they were carried out at home within the family.

## Re-Islamization in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, all the newly established successor nation states, both Muslim and Christian, have been experiencing major religious revivals and reforms. Many people see this religious/spiritual awakening among the various Soviet peoples as a natural process in which people try to fill the spiritual void, which was created by seventy years of atheist propaganda. The ideas of religious freedom and practice as part of the democratic processes in the post-Soviet era opened up a large space for religious dialogue and discourse among the former Soviet peoples. This spiritual quest and need for religious renewal brought people into contact with the outside world. Many foreign religious groups, political groups, and other organizations, both Muslim and Christian, poured into the former Soviet Union.

Scholars recognize that such movements of Islamic renewal did not grow in isolation but rather developed throughout the Muslim world. It is believed that in the eighteenth century, Islamic renewal took place in “response to the declining effectiveness of existing institutions” and “in other cases such movements are believed to have risen in response to the early European imperial expansion.”<sup>157</sup>

Islamic renewal or revival in post-Soviet Muslim Central Asia is part of the wider renewal process of the Muslim frontiers and peripheries. Historical experiences of other countries like China, which has a large Muslim population, attest to the fact that these kinds of reformist developments grow out of increased interaction between the center and

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<sup>157</sup> Voll, John Obert, “Foundations for Renewal and Reform. Islamic Movements in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.” In: *The Oxford history of Islam*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 526-517.



the peripheral parts of the Muslim world. According to Dru Gladney, one of the major religious reforms in Chinese Islam began towards the end of the Qing dynasty [1644-1911]. During the first decades of the twentieth century, many Muslims began traveling to and from the Middle East to China. This increased contact with the Middle East exposed Chinese Muslims to many new foreign religious ideas and led them “to reevaluate their traditional notions of Islam.”<sup>158</sup> This influence of foreign Muslim ideas led to the emergence and establishment of many new Hui Muslim associations and organizations such as “Chinese Muslim Mutual Progress Association in Beijing in 1912, the Chinese Muslims Association in 1925, the Chinese Muslim Young Students Association in Nanjing in 1931, the Society for the Promotion of Education Among Muslims in Nanjing in 1931, and the Chinese Muslim General Association in Jinan in 1934.”<sup>159</sup> Hui Muslims went to study at Cairo’s prestigious al Azhar University and many Hui *hajji* who returned from their pilgrimages to Mecca had greater religious authority, particularly in smaller isolated communities.<sup>160</sup> Upon their return, these Hui *hajji* “initiated several reforms, engaging themselves once again in the contested space between Islamic ideals and Chinese culture.”<sup>161</sup> In other words, local scholars, who upon their return from Mecca, began to “renew the Islamic authenticity of faith and practice in their homeland, condemned the earlier combinations of Islamic and local religious elements as being idolatrous innovations, *bid’ah*.”<sup>162</sup> For example, as Gladney notes, the

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<sup>158</sup> Gladney, Dru C., p. 457.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>162</sup> Voll, John Obert, pp. 518-519.

main concerns of Hui Muslim reformers in China dealt with the following aspects of their local Islamic practices and rituals:

Although the reformers were concerned with larger than merely “correcting” what they regarded as unorthodox practice like previous reforms in China, it is at the practical and ritual level that they initiated their critique. Seeking perhaps to replace “Islamic theater” with scripture, they proscribed the veneration of saints, their tombs, and their shrines, and sought to stem the growing influence of well-known individual *ahong* and Sufi *menhuan* leaders. Stressing orthodox practice through advocating purified “non-Chinese” Islam, they criticized such cultural accretions as the wearing of white mourning dress and the decoration of mosques with Chinese or Arabic texts.<sup>163</sup>

Kyrgyzstan has been a part of this re-Islamization process, which has occurred in many other peripheral Muslim states in different periods. The current wave of Islamic renewal can be considered the second stage of renewal in the history of the nomadic Kyrgyz. The first stage occurred in the early 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when the nomadic Kyrgyz made broader contact with oasis towns and agricultural oases and finally became incorporated into the Kokand Khanate. However, some scholars argue that Islam began to emerge “as the pre-eminent religion of Central Asian nomads in the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.”<sup>164</sup> It is also believed that since the nomadic Kyrgyz lived in the Pamir-Alay and Tian-Shan mountain ranges, their territories were never incorporated into a Central Asian state. And this resulted in their much later adoption of Islam than the Kazakhs and the Turkmens.<sup>165</sup> Again, Sufi sheikhs, *eshans*, and dervishes were the first missionaries who played a major role in Islamizing the nomadic Kyrgyz,<sup>166</sup> especially during the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Kokand khanate. A special religious poetry, containing Sufi ideas,

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<sup>163</sup> Gladney, p. 459.

<sup>164</sup> Polonskaya, Ludmila and Malashenko, Alexei. *Islam in Central Asia*. Ithaca Press, 1994, p. 31.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>166</sup> *Op.cit.*

developed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the advancing Russian colonization. The country's new independent status after the Soviet collapse gave the *Muftiyat* (Muslim Spiritual Board) of the Kyrgyz republic the right to officially establish itself in 1996. Today the *Muftiyat* has twenty departments/divisions and four vice presidents. The country has seven provinces and each has its own *kazyiat*, or religious administration. Before 1991 there were thirty-nine registered mosques in Kyrgyzstan. Today there are about two thousand of them, more than half of which are officially registered. Until 1995-1997, people built mosques by the means of *ashar*, volunteer work. After that Arab investors began helping to build new mosques. During the last four years, the building of new mosques has increased tremendously. In northern Kyrgyzstan, many mosques have been built with the support of foreign and local sponsors. Before its construction, every mosque must obtain permission from the *Muftiyat*. Permission is given on the basis of population, the number of people who actually pray, and whether they need a place to gather and pray together. If that village or town has an old existing mosque, they help to restore it. The *Muftiyat* approves the project only if the people themselves request a mosque, because there are some people who want to build a mosque for their own personal interests. In some places, new mosques have been built and old ones restored, however, no one goes to them. The Arabs simply leave after they finish building the mosque. As for the architecture of the mosques, it depends on the landscape. Sponsors usually propose their own projects. The size varies according to the number of people who will be using the mosque.

I interviewed two key Muslim clergy in Kyrgyzstan: Muratali Aji Jumanov, Muftiy of the Kyrgyz Republic,<sup>167</sup> and Abdishükür Narmatov, former President of the Islamic Institute in Bishkek. We discussed religious developments and renewal in Kyrgyzstan since the country's independence. Abdishükür Narmatov,<sup>168</sup> who at the time of the interview was serving as the President of the Islamic Institute in Bishkek, described the establishment of the Institute. It is said that the idea for creating such an Institute appeared right after Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991. Before the Muslim clergy of Kyrgyzstan used to belong to the main Tashkent headquarters, which included all of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. During the Soviet period, there was only one *medrese* (from Ar. "*madrassa*", "religious school") in the whole Soviet Union; it was in Bukhara. When the Islamic Institute was established in Tashkent, the Muslim scholars in Kyrgyzstan initiated the idea of opening a *medrese* in Bishkek. The *medrese* was opened at the old existing mosque, which was being rebuilt. The *medrese* was opened with only eight or nine students who were Kyrgyz citizens studying in Bukhara accepted other students, and opened it in 1990. At that time, this institute did not have a building or

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<sup>167</sup> Muratali Aji (hajji) Jumanov was born in 1974 in the village of İntimäk of the province of Osh, southern Kyrgyzstan. In 1991 he began his religious education at the Hazreti Uthman medrese in the city of Kizil-Kiya, another small city in southern Kyrgyzstan. From 1998-2000 he attended the Islamic Institute in Ufa, Russia. Upon his return from Ufa, he served as an imam and later worked as a teacher in Kizil-Kiya. He also served as the vice *qazi* of the Osh province for three years. In 1999 he came to Bishkek to serve as the press secretary of the Muftiyat. Later he became the deputy of the Muftiy. Since 2002, Jumanov has been serving as the Muftiy of the Kyrgyz Republic.

<sup>168</sup> From 1993 to 2000 Narmatov Abdishükür studied in Egypt and graduated from the department of Law and *Shari'a*. Since November of 2000 he has been serving as the President of the Islamic Institute. He is married and has two sons and two daughters. In addition to heading the Institute, every Friday, Narmatov appears on a program called "Juma Qutbasi" (Friday Preaching) which is aired on Kyrgyz national TV and Radio Corporation. Besides these, he works in collaboration with a TV program called "Kolomto Ruh Ordosu" (Hearth [family] as the Center for Spirituality) and teaches in the Arab department of the Kyrgyz Architectural and Construction Institute. Every Friday he gives an hour of religious talk on the Friday prayer at the central mosque here in Bishkek. Recently he translated the Quran into Kyrgyz and the copies of the publication was distributed to people free of charge, because Quran must not be sold.

enough teachers. Later in 1993 the small *medrese* turned into an institute with the aim of educating people about Islam in Kyrgyzstan. During the seventy or eighty years of Communist rule, as Narmatov notes, Kyrgyz people had distanced themselves from Islam and its values. Even though more than 80% of Kyrgyzstan's population is Muslim, people had no or very little knowledge of Islam. Therefore, it was necessary to raise the level of religious education of existing *imams* and prepare young Kyrgyz religious scholars and revive and develop forgotten Islamic practices and values.

In 2003, the Islamic Institute celebrated its ten-year anniversary. Those who graduate from the Institute as *imams* are sent to countryside, where there is a shortage of *imams*, e.g., in the Narin province of northern Kyrgyzstan. There are a total of 415 students at the Institute, of whom 130 are women. About 80% are ethnic Kyrgyz. There are also some young Russian men and women who have converted to Islam. In addition, there are Uzbek and Uygur men and women from Uzbekistan and Kazakh students from Kazakhstan. About 80% of the teaching staff is Kyrgyz. Arabic is mandatory for the students. Each week students study at least eight hours of Arabic. They study free of charge at this Institute. The Institute also has Arab teachers. Teachers' salary is paid by the *Muftiyat*.

Thus Islamic revival and development in Kyrgyzstan began with building of mosques and *medreses*. As mentioned above during the Soviet period, there were only about forty mosques in Kyrgyzstan. Bishkek had only one small mosque. Narmatov recalls that in 1990, only about forty *aksakals* (white-bearded elderly men) would come for the Friday prayer. All together, there would be 60 or 70 people. They were mostly Uighurs, Tatars, and Dungans (Hui), but no young ethnic Kyrgyz. Today, more than 80%

of the people who come to the mosque are young Kyrgyz men. Now there are nearly 2000 mosques, seven Islamic institutes, and many *medreses*.

Narmatov also mentioned the fact that government officials who preached atheism began following basic Islamic rules and practices. He notes that during Soviet times, when the father of a government official died, he could not participate at his father's *janaza* (funeral prayer before the body is taken to the burial ground). Even the former president Akayev invited official Muslim clergy for *iftar* (evening meal after fasting during the holy month of Ramadan) to his residency. Along these positive changes, Narmatov also points out the "negative" religious developments. Being more democratic and open society than the other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan has been allowing all kinds of foreign religious sects into the country. He mentioned that these different Christian sects (about forty) are creating many misunderstandings among both Muslim and Christian people, who in the past lived peacefully side-by-side. There are many cases in which young Kyrgyz people convert to other religions than Islam. Like many other practicing Muslim clergy and *ulema* (religious scholars) Narmatov wants Islam to fully penetrate into the Kyrgyz society. He notes "the religion of Islam is not only about going to a mosque or wearing certain clothes. It is everything. Without Islam, we cannot have good economic development or achieve moral values. Islam should play a big role in our lives. When Allah Taala created each human being, he said there is a void in their heart and that void should be filled with Islam."

Narmatov also admits that it is difficult to educate people about all aspects of Islam and make them applicable to their everyday lives in ten years. He thinks that there

should be more *missionary work* (ügüt-nasaat) and religious educational programs on TV and radio. One should introduce the subject of *iyman* [faith] into the schools.

I also interviewed several Kyrgyz intellectuals, scholars and poets, on the significance of Islam for them and for Kyrgyz society in general. Since most Kyrgyz scholars and intellectual and were educated in the Soviet period and thus had none or very little religious education, their opinions vary tremendously from those of the pious Muslim clergy. Kachkinbay Artıkbayev (Doctor of Kyrgyz philology, Kyrgyz State National University, Bishkek) who is a well-known and respected scholar in Kyrgyzstan, expressed the following strong opinion on the subject of Islamic renewal:

We do not need new mosques. They are worth nothing. That time has passed. Today the young people do not care for them. Those who practiced religion and prayed five times a day are all gone. In our village, a young Kyrgyz man built a mosque with the help of Arabs. It is built poorly. There are only 150 households in the village and only about five or six people go to the mosque. People did not ask for a mosque. That young Kyrgyz man got rich from it.

There are many young people who convert to Christianity for money. They are given \$3 or \$5 a day and asked to bring their friends. Mostly people who have low education and a weak personality are easily deceived.<sup>169</sup> There are many people who violate religion even in Saudi Arabia. The Quran has gone through many changes according to the politics and interests of the people who wrote and interpreted it. I myself believe in the existence of a supernatural power. However, we misunderstand it. Islam fosters the theory that one must be content with whatever God has written on one's forehead. (I think all presidents like this idea). In other words, one must be content with being poor or a slave. This is the harmful side of the religion (Islam). In my opinion, a person

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<sup>169</sup> According to the recent report of the Kyrgyz Program of the Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, in the southern province of Jalal-Abad, Christian missionary groups are targeting mostly unemployed and poor people with health problems and little or no education. It is said that there are at least thousand people, of which over 90% are ethnically Kyrgyz, who have converted to Christianity. The members of the Christian organizations in Jalal-Abad, such as "New Life" (Jangı jashoo) and "Jesus the Savior" (Isa mashayak), are mostly young men who have identity problems because they are not yet "intellectually developed and thus have not found their place in life, or who have problems in their family." The staff of these organizations donate one tenth of their salary to support the needy and the orphans. According to the local journalist Anarkhan Jangıbaeva, between one thousand to three thousand soms (\$25-\$70) are given per person to convert to Christianity. (RFERL, Wednesday, November 29, 2006, [www.azattyk.org](http://www.azattyk.org)).

should do whatever he/she can do to better his/her life by getting an education and improve his/her mind. Thieves do bad things because they have a hard life. No matter how much you teach *ïyman* (faith) to people, it will be no use if it does not feed them.

There are many elderly Kyrgyz scholars and intellectuals who share similar views. Unlike the new generation of young and middle aged Muslim Kyrgyz men and clergy, most of these intellectuals lived a nomadic life in their youth and thus developed a strong attachment to Kyrgyz traditional values and practices, which they learned from their parents and grandparents. They possess a rich knowledge of Kyrgyz oral traditions and they will not tolerate any other ideology or dogma, which undermines the value of this unique oral literary heritage. Some of them have systematized this view into a set of beliefs that they call *Tengirchilik*, discussed in Chapter 6. One of these intellectuals, Ömüräliev explained to me what the Islamic fundamentalists oppose in Kyrgyz culture:

People have been living following their own customs and traditions. What kind of process is taking place today? They [foreign and local Islamic clergy] are forcing people to adopt [Islam] fully through radio and television. The process is occurring of introducing by force everything that is taking place in Arabia. However, the culture of those people living in the desert and here is different. They are not compatible. For example, in the south (southern Kyrgyzstan), they tell people to bury their dead as soon as the person dies. Yes, the condition in hot places [i.e. Arabia] did not allow them to keep their dead for a long time. But we live in the cool mountains here, and people waited for each other and showed their last respect to the deceased. People waited for two, five and seven days until all the relatives and people arrived. They sang mourning songs in which they glorified the deeds of the deceased person, starting from his birth until his death. Such a custom does not exist in other cultures. Others think that we are just singing songs, however, the philosophy is different. If people follow what the mullahs say, they will lose their *koshok*, [funeral lament]. *Koshok* is a great world in itself. We have Kanıkey's *koshok*, a *koshok* sung in honor of Ormon Khan [19<sup>th</sup> century] and so on. These are not simple rituals, but rather people's worldview. If we lose this tradition, we lose our essence of being a [Kyrgyz] people.



Saudi Arabia has played a major role in the rapid growth of Islamic revival and militant Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia.<sup>170</sup> The militant groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), attempted to overthrow the secular regime of Uzbek government and establish an Islamic state, are said to have had the backing of Saudi Arabia. The first wave of Saudi support to Central Asia came after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, which was a “wake up call”<sup>171</sup> for the entire Islamic world. Saudi Arabia was the first Islamic country to which the Afghani turned for help because “it had powerful financial resources” and most importantly was the home of “300-350,000 people who had originally come from Central Asia, mostly from Uzbekistan, as descendants of pilgrims who had settled there in pre-Revolutionary times and as *basmachis* (armed rebel fighters against the Soviet rule) who took refuge there after their defeat in Soviet times.”<sup>172</sup>

Soon after the collapse of the Soviet atheist regime, the Saudis began sponsoring the construction of mosques in all of the newly established independent states of Central Asia. By 1994 over 15,000 new mosques had been built in the region.<sup>173</sup> According to Mehrdad Haghayeghi “In 1990, Saudi Arabia donated 1,000,000 copies of the Koran to the religious board of Uzbekistan for distribution.”<sup>174</sup> Local religious/charity organizations that were extremist in nature received financial support from Saudi Arabia

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<sup>170</sup> McKay, Jonathan, “Central Asia, Islamic Fundamentalism, and the Saudi Connection.” Final paper submitted for the course “Islam and Native Religion Among the Nomadic Peoples of Central Asia, NEAR496C/596C” offered in Winter 2006 by Elmira Köchümkulova, Ph.D. Candidate, Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>172</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly V. “Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.” Spring 2003. The Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies.  
[http://ist-socrates.Berkeley.edu/~bsp/publications/2003\\_06-naum.pdf](http://ist-socrates.Berkeley.edu/~bsp/publications/2003_06-naum.pdf).

<sup>173</sup> Gold, Dore. *Hatred's Kingdom*, Washington D.C.: Eagle Publishing, 2003, p. 134.

<sup>174</sup> Haghayeghi, Mehrdad. *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*. St. Martin's Press, NY, 1995, p. 97.

to build mosques and *madrasahs*, religious schools, while hundreds of young Central Asian male students received scholarships to study in Saudi Arabia. It would be wrong to assert that Islamic revival in Central Asia was entirely due to the Saudi support, “but the donations and funding by the Saudi government helped accelerate the pace and provide the necessary Islamic infrastructure for the revival to happen.”<sup>175</sup> The Saudi Arabia’s aid which went to the building of religious networks in Central Asia decreased tremendously after the 9/11 attack on the US. Central Asian states, like many other countries, fully supported the global fight against terrorism. Today Central Asia’s religious connection to Saudi Arabia is kept mainly through the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. Saudi Arabia gives a quota to each Central Asian republic as for how many pilgrims they can send per year.

The main two militant groups such as IMU and Taliban in Central Asia have been destroyed, but there are some Islamic organizations, which are operating underground in Central Asia. The most active among them is Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Islamic party of Liberation.

### Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islamiyya (Islamic Liberation Party)

The re-Islamization process or religious revival in post-Soviet Central Asia, especially in Kyrgyzstan, is associated, to a large extent, with the religious-political activities of the fundamentalist Islamic organization Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islamiyya, the party of Islamic Liberation (hereafter referred to as “HT”). I personally observed the rapid growth of religious-political activities of HT from annual visits to my hometown, Kizil-Jar, since the mid-1990s. Since that time the “HT” has been operating in Central

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<sup>175</sup> McKay, Jonathan, p. 6.

Asia with the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate.<sup>176</sup> The Party was founded in Saudi Arabia and Jordan by a group of Palestinians in 1952 with the mission to free Palestine from the Jews. The party's leaders dismiss both Sufi and Shi'ite interpretations of Islam and seek to return to the "pure Islam" of the "Righteous Caliphs" who followed the prophet Muhammad.<sup>177</sup> Unlike some other militant Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan, HT intends to achieve the establishment of an Islamic state in a "peaceful" way and considers it the holy duty of every Muslim to work towards that goal.<sup>178</sup>

HT increased in popularity among unemployed young and middle-aged men who sought to fill an internal spiritual void with the help of HT which was created due to socio-economic and political factors. However, in recent years, the party has also attracted educated groups of society such as college and university students, teachers, women's groups, NGO activists, and merchants, all of whom are dissatisfied with the government's inability to deal with socioeconomic problems.<sup>179</sup> Originally, the HT party was mostly concentrated in southern Kyrgyzstan, which has a large Uzbek population. Therefore, its membership was primarily composed of ethnic Uzbeks, not Kyrgyz.<sup>180</sup> Due to the strict religious and political atmosphere in neighboring Uzbekistan since the

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<sup>176</sup> Khamidov, Alisher, "Explaining the Emergence of the Hizb ut-Tarir in Kyrgyzstan: Structure, Change, Choice." In: *Cultural Interaction and Conflict in Central and Inner Asia*. Papers presented at the Central and Inner Asia Seminar, University of Toronto, 3-4 May 2002 and 23-24 May 2003. Eds. Michael Gervers, Uradyn E. Bulag, Gillian Long. Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia, No. 6, Asian Institute, Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004, p. 249.

<sup>177</sup> McGregor, Andrew, "Caliphate in Central Asia: Islamist Ambition or Political Fantasy?" In: *Cultural Interaction and Conflict in Central and Inner Asia*. Papers presented at the Central and Inner Asia Seminar, University of Toronto, 3-4 May 2002 and 23-24 May 2003. Eds. Michael Gervers, Uradyn E. Bulag, Gillian Long. Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia, No. 6, Asian Institute, Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004, p. 334.

<sup>178</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>179</sup> Khamidov, Alisher, p. 257.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

1990's, many religious groups and parties such as HT, found the socio-economic and religious environments quite favorable in Kyrgyzstan, called an "Island of Democracy" in Central Asia. The government of Uzbekistan did not allow any Islamic revivalists to grow and function on its territory and therefore, its religious leaders shifted their focus to neighboring Kyrgyzstan. In 1998, one of the most active religious groups in Uzbekistan was the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which was originally established in Uzbekistan's Namangan province of the Ferghana Valley. Many conservative Uzbek men and women who grew beard and wore *hijab* were labeled as Wahhabis, "even though they had no or very little connection with Saudi Royal family."<sup>181</sup> In 1991, together with other militants, the Movement's leaders, Tahir Yuldash and Juma Namangani, created an Islamic "mini-state" in the Valley in opposition to President Karimov's secular government.<sup>182</sup> In 1999, after being accused of carrying out a major bombing in Tashkent, many armed members of the Movement fled to Kyrgyzstan's southern mountainous region of Batken, where they challenged the Kyrgyz army. Now stationed in Kyrgyzstan, the IMU called for a jihad:

The primary objective for this declaration of Jihad is the establishment of an Islamic state with the application of the *Sharia*, founded upon the Koran and the Noble Prophetic *sunnah*. Also from amongst the goals of the declaration of Jihad is: The defense of our religion of Islam in our land against those who oppose Islam... The Islamic Movement warns the Uzbek government in Tashkent from propping up or supporting the fight against the Muslims....The reason for the start of the Jihad in Kyrgyzstan is due to the stance of the ruler Askar Akayev in Bishkek, in arresting thousands of Muslim Uzbeks who had migrated as refugees to Kyrgyzstan and were handed over to Karimov's henchmen...<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> McKay, Jonathan, p. 2.

<sup>182</sup> McGregor, Andrew, p. 332.

<sup>183</sup> The above IMU statement is signed by Al-Zubayr ibn 'Abdur Raheem, Head of the Religious Leadership of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, 25 August, 1999, See: Rashid Ahmed, *Jihad, The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 247-249.

According to Alisher Khamidov, the ethnic Uzbeks, as the largest minority group in Kyrgyzstan, feeling excluded from political participation and pressured in the economic sphere, became engaged in radical Islam.<sup>184</sup> However, in recent years, the party's composition has crossed ethnic lines. Since HT is an underground organization, the exact number of its members remains unknown. According to local estimates in the Ferghana Valley, HT has about 10% of Uzbekistan's 26 million population. The official estimate of HT membership in Kyrgyzstan is 3,000 people, however, in 2001, it is said that the number of HT members reached 6,000 in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>185</sup>

HT is officially banned in Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan. The official Islam, administered by the *Muftiy* of the Kyrgyz Republic, functions in cooperation with the state in condemning HT and its activities. Through official newspapers and journals, Muslim clergy explain to the people the difference between Central Asian Islam and other fundamentalist Islamic groups such as HT, which are coming from foreign countries. During my interview with Muratali Ajı Jumanov, the Muftiy of Kyrgyzstan he said followings:

In Central Asian Islam, our *aqıyda* (creed) is *ahli sunna va jamaa* (Community of Sunni believers). There are four *mashabs* [schools]. However, in Kyrgyzstan there are many misunderstandings about the *mashabs* in Islam. We consider the four *mashabs* as being correct. The rest are dangerous. They are small religious sects or fundamental groups, which are creating a lot of problems. Groups like the Wahhabi and Hizb ut-Tahrir manipulate the religion. We are Sunni Muslims, who obey the *sunnahs* of the Prophet Muhammad, whereas, the Shi'ite Muslims, e.g., Iranians, do not accept the Prophet Muhammad [!!], but rather his fourth *Sahaba*, Ali. They make a stone out of the soil where Ali died and pray by placing that stone in front of them.

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<sup>184</sup> Khamidov, Alisher, p. 254.

<sup>185</sup> Op.cit.

For the past three years the membership of HT has been growing in Kizil-Jar as well. During my interview with Sidiq Moldo, imam of Kizil-Jar he described to me his official duty as an imam of the town and the activities at the mosque, which was built in the mid-1990s. At the time when I interviewed him, he had been serving as an imam at this mosque for almost five years. The local mosque offers religious teachings for the public and restrains people, mostly youngsters, from doing bad things. Every day before prayers he conducts *maruza*, i.e., he teaches people how to respect the elderly, how to wash before prayer, how to use the toilet, etc. In his Friday sermons Sidiq Moldo talks about morality using *Hadith* (tradition, i.e., deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions). In addition, Sidiq Moldo teaches young men, most of whom are high school graduates about traditional Islam and explains them the difference between orthodox Islam and fundamentalist groups such as HT. The majority of his students are Kyrgyz, a few of them are Uzbeks. Sidiq Moldo notes that usually, it is the parents who want their children to study at the *medrese* (religious schools), because they fear that their sons might join fundamentalist religious organizations. All imams receive orders or *fatwas* in Arabic from the Republic's *Muftiyat*, which controls their work. Sidiq Moldo states: "It is not good if you say something wrong or against the state. We do not engage in politics." He is very much against the creation of an Islamic caliphate: "In the *Nur surah* of the Quran, it is written that there will not be a caliphate, but when the right time comes, Allah might create it for you. Until then, no one knows when it will happen. Only Allah knows."

He believes that the young people join HT because they lack religious knowledge. Secondly, he notes, it is a struggle for power. Some young men come to the mosque and tell others that the prayers should be done this way and another group comes and says “No, they should be done that way.” And this creates conflicts among the religious clergy and others being influenced by fundamentalists or other foreign forms of Islam.

Unlike many ordinary Kyrgyz, learned *imams* like Sïdik Moldo can tell the difference between Central Asian Islam and Islam practiced in other parts of the Muslim world such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. One major difference is that in these countries people usually pray without wearing anything on their heads, whereas in Central Asia both men and women wear a hat or scarf during the prayer. Now Arab Muslims are coming and lecturing local imams on the “correct” way to pray. Another difference Sïdik Moldo noted is that in these countries, people do not recite the Quran after meals: “They just leave the *dastorkon* (tablecloth with food on it) without saying *oomiyin* (amen) by stroking their faces with their palms. They do not have a custom for giving blessings at a feast.” There are many state registered and underground *medreses* now in Central Asia and each teaches prayers, the Quran and *hadith* differently. In Kyrgyzstan, all state *medreses* follow the rules written by the *Muftiyat*. Again these inconsistencies in religious teachings are creating misunderstandings and conflicts among the clergy and people.

During my last visit in summer of 2005, I was told most of my male classmates and their wives had also joined HT. One of my classmates is from my clan, and he lived across the street from my parents' house. One day my so-called “Hizbut” classmates invited me for a dinner at his house. There were six of them, and I was the only female

there. We sat around a *dastorkon* and inquired about each other's well-being and work. They asked me what I was writing my dissertation on. The topic of my work led to an interesting discussion about the politics of Islam and the Islamic revival in Kizil-Jar. They did not say they were members of HT, but they openly and passionately expressed their strong faith in Islam and how it had changed their life for the better. I was personally happy for them that they had found something to fill that spiritual void inside them. They all told me that before they had submitted to Islam, they had lived without hope or goals. Every time they used to gather, they would drink vodka and get into fights with one another. After "reentering" Islam they became good people. One of them said that, before, they would dance with each other's wives at parties, but now they would never do this. Islam has helped them to improve their relationships with their wives, they said. They named their children after religious historical personalities in Islam. They were angry with some of their high school male teachers, who, despite their role as educators, still drank alcohol. One of my classmates even confronted his former teacher, saying he should not be teaching at the school. He said that every time he accused someone of alcohol consumption, they would ask him: "Oh, since when did you become a good man?!" And he would reply: "Since submitting to Allah."

In my recent telephone conversation with my mother, I learned that HT is still continuing their illegal activities in Kizil-Jar. She said that there is a group of Kyrgyz girls who are coming to the middle school wearing scarves and long dresses. When they first appeared in their classroom, the principal expelled them. Their parents, however, went to the regional district administration and complained about the principal. Somehow, they were given permission to attend the school wearing their *hijab*. It is said



that HT pays these young girls 500 *soms* (about \$12 USD) per month for wearing a scarf. In other words they are mostly targeting families with poor economic and educational background. Young girls with poor self-esteem and with low grades become easily brainwashed. According to my mother, people fear that these girls may even be used as suicide bombers in the future.

### The Story of My Paternal Uncle Mirzakal (from a *momun*<sup>186</sup> man to a fanatic Muslim)

Before the years 2000-2001, people in Kizil-Jar had only a vague awareness of HT and its religious and political goals. Being radical Islamists or pious Muslims was usually associated with ethnic Uzbeks, not Kyrgyz. However, the last time I visited, to conduct my research in 2002, I was surprised to learn that HT was present among my own relatives. My paternal uncle Mirzakal had become a very dedicated HT member and had created many problems for himself, his children, wife, and parents. He had begun his religious learning when he and his family were living in Uzbekistan. Before moving to Kizil-Jar in 1998, my paternal relatives and uncles all lived in the Namangan province of Uzbekistan. In the early 1990's, I remember visiting my grandparents in their Uzbek village. At that time my uncle Mirzakal, who was in his early 30's, had joined some local group of Uzbek men who gathered regularly for *ziyofat* or *gap*,<sup>187</sup> (Uzbek women gather separately for *gap*) traditional social gatherings or small parties popular among ethnic

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<sup>186</sup> "Momun" comes from Ar. "mu'min" which means "believer, one who preserves safety." It implies the "safety and surety in the world of Islam." (Gordon D. Newby. *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2002. p. 157). In Central Asian culture, *momun* is a very kind person with a soft language and character and thus does no harm to anyone.

<sup>187</sup> *Gap* is a small traditional party among Uzbek men who occasionally get together at one of their homes to have a nice meal, usually *osh* (pilaf) and to entertain themselves by engaging in a conversation and telling jokes.

Uzbeks. At these social gatherings, they spread the HT ideology and discussed ways of solving socio-economic and political problems.<sup>188</sup> In 1996, when I visited my uncle's family in Uzbekistan, I was surprised at how his oldest daughter, Güljan, who was only six years old, recited *surahs* (chapters) from the Qu'ran in Arabic. I recorded her recitation. My uncle had taught her those *surahs*. Her parents and grandparents were proud of her. Later, by 1999 all my paternal relatives had sold their houses in Uzbekistan and moved back to Kizil-Jar, which was their original winter home. Later, my uncle Mirzakal also moved to Kizil-Jar with his family. In Kizil-Jar my uncle could not continue his religious learning for there was no such gap circles among the Kyrgyz men. But he regularly went to the Friday prayers at the local mosque. Not long after, HT cells began operating in Kizil-Jar by distributing leaflets about HT's ideas and calling for religious reform. My uncle became one of the most active and dedicated members of the group, which met secretly at night. His wife would complain that my uncle would come home very late after midnight and would not say where he had been. Later, my uncle forced his three daughters to wear the *hijab*, which is a scarf worn in a particular way and to observe the prayers. My aunt refused to wear the *hijab* for about two years, and finally, in 2004 she too joined HT after my uncle threatened to marry another HT woman if she did not pray five times a day and wear the *hijab*. He sent his oldest son to a *medrese* in Jalal-Abad, one of the provincial capital cities in southern Kyrgyzstan. His daughters were expelled from the middle school for several months because of their *hijab*.

The HT members preached fundamentals of Islam everyday and whenever and wherever they could. As Khamidov notes, they used various social gatherings and events

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

such as weddings, funerals and memorial feasts to spread the party's ideology.<sup>189</sup> Many elderly people, who traditionally had held a respected position in the society, became very angry with some of the young Kyrgyz HT who had assumed a self-granted religious authority to teach people how to be good Muslims.

In the winter of 2003, when I was doing research in my hometown, the town's militia arrested my uncle Mirzakal for illegal distribution of religious pamphlets. The militia searched his home and found newspapers and books published underground by HT. My father, grandmother, my aunt and other uncles, and I went to the local militia office where my uncle was kept in a small room. Since the militia knew our family, they allowed us to come in and try to convince him to stop distributing the illegal papers. Every one of us tried to tell him that what he was doing is dangerous for him and his family. My grandmother cried and begged him to get out of this group. My uncle stood firm and did not want to give up his religious principles. He said he was not afraid of anyone or anything except Allah. He did not mind going to jail if that was what was written on his forehead. All our efforts were in vain, as my uncle did not stop preaching Islam to us nor to the militiamen, who, the next day, seeing the tears in my grandmother's eyes, let him go with a strict warning. Besides preaching, my uncle earned his living by selling flour on the local market. He bought the flour from Uzbek merchants on the other side of the Narin river for cheaper price and sold it in Kizil-Jar for more expensive price.

That very day, my grandparents, great uncles, and uncles all gathered at my parents' house to discuss my uncle Mirzakal's problem. They were saying what happened to our *momun* son? They invited the local imam and another elderly mullah in town to

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<sup>189</sup> Khamidov, Alisher, p. 257.

carry out a *chillayasin* for my uncle. “Chilla” comes from the Persian word “forty”, and “Ya-Sin” are the initial letters of the 36th *surah* of the Qur’an. No one knows the meaning of these letters. Ya-Sin is considered the heart of the Qur’an and it is usually recited for a dying person to make his soul leave without difficulty.<sup>190</sup> In Central Asia, mullahs also recite the Ya-Sin *surah* forty times for a mentally sick person. By preaching almost day and night in Kizil-Jar and in other villages around it, my uncle had become exhausted, skinny, and unhealthy. By listening to how my uncle spoke about Islamic principles and tortures in hell, we knew something was wrong with him, because he was so deeply involved in his mission; in other words what he was trying to do was unrealistic and risky. My great-uncle Anarbay said: “*Oolugup kalgan*,” “His mind is disturbed,” an expression used in traditional pre-Islamic belief and healing practices. It was a very ironic situation for my uncle, i.e., he himself was a mullah but had to be treated by another mullah or imam for having a disturbed mind. In the beginning he refused to be read the *chillayasin*, then he did not mind it. The imam and my uncles all told him that he could be a pious Muslim and do good work without being involved in political Islam. But he did not want to listen. Later that year he and one of my classmates were again detained by the local militia for illegal distribution of HT pamphlets. The regional court gave him a one-year jail sentence in the city of Osh. My grandparents gave up hope. He was released after a year and returned home and continued selling flour in the local market, but also resumed his previous religious activities by going on *dawat* (dawa), religious preaching. His wife agreed to wear the *hijab* and pray five times a day after he returned from jail. When I visited home the last time in the summer of 2005, I was surprised to see his wife

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<sup>190</sup> Notes from Modogazi Ziyaev’s lecture on “Ya-Sin Surah,” Bishkek, Islamic Institute, June 24, 2003.

wearing the *hijab*. She had always been a talkative woman, but after becoming “religious” she became even more talkative. She began preaching to me about Allah, hell and heaven, the first time she came to greet me. I noticed that all our relatives and people in her neighborhood avoided her.

Just before I left for the States in the summer of 2005, my uncle was arrested for a second time; this time the court sentenced him to two years in jail. When my father visited him in jail, he was still holding strong onto his religious principles. This time, he grew his beard long.

While he was in jail, his seventeen year old eldest daughter Güljan married an Uzbek man in Jalal-Abad. For our relatives, this came as a shock. Later they found out that her father had given that man, who is also a HT, the permission to marry his daughter. He took Güljan as a second wife. The man was married and had several children. Learning that the man was already married and that he is also an Uzbek, my aunts brought Güljan back to the village. After about a month, she eloped or was kidnapped again, no one knows the truth and my relatives just gave up and kept cursing her. None of the traditional marriage ceremonies involving relatives and parents were done for her. In other words, Güljan did not have her grandparents’ and other close relatives’ blessing before getting married. The last news from her was that her husband divorced her and sent her back to her parents in Kizil-Jar. However, my uncle and sister in-law do not seem to feel responsible for the unhappy life of their young daughter. Recently, I talked with my paternal aunt Sirga on the phone and she quoted Güljan’s parents who said: “Oh, it is O.K. She will see what is written on her forehead by Allah

and will get married again to another [HT] man.” However, this kind of attitude with no shame and honor is not tolerated in our Ogotur clan and also in Kyrgyz culture in general.

## Conclusion

In concluding the chapter we can say that Islam is part of Kyrgyz and Kazakh identity. Their Muslim identity, however, does not override their ethnic identity as Kyrgyz and Kazakhs. There are many un-Islamic traditions, customs, and socio-cultural values rooted in their nomadic heritage that makes the Kyrgyz real Kyrgyz and the Kazakhs real Kazakhs. Among many such important legacies of nomadic heritage are the funeral customs which have incorporated many Islamic and some Soviet/Russian funerary traditions, but yet preserved some of the main ancient rites and practices (see Chapter 5). As the Kyrgyz writer and journalist Choyun Ömüraliev notes correctly “when Islam [or Sufism] began spreading among the nomadic Kyrgyz it was tolerant of the local customs and beliefs. Before adopting Islam, Kyrgyz knew and believed in the existence of the one and only God called *Tängri/Tengir* (see Chapter 6). The Islam which is now being promoted in Central Asia by fundamentalist groups such as HT does not want to tolerate anything that is un-Islamic or pre-Islamic.

## Chapter V:

### Kyrgyz Funeral Rites: “Islamic In Form, ‘Pagan’ In Content”

#### Introduction

Now I have laid out what Islam means to contemporary Kyrgyz in the preceding chapter, I will proceed to illustrate how this Islam mixes and interferes with other traditions by giving a detailed account of one major custom that shows the interrelation clearly: the contemporary Kyrgyz funeral. Many important aspects of Kyrgyz funeral such as leaving a *kereez*, final words of the dying person, *koshok*, traditional lament songs and *ash*, offering of the memorial feast are closely related with oral tradition, and the only place to learn about them are the oral heroic epics which contain rich cultural information described from the native viewpoint. Therefore, I make extensive use of Kyrgyz oral epics to support my arguments. I will later be providing analysis and examples to show how the oral literature combines tradition and at the same time is a living and changing tradition.

Funerals and the range of customs and rituals associated with them have always been a significant part of Kyrgyz social life. Since their adoption of Islam, the Kyrgyz incorporated many Muslim funerary traditions, but did so without replacing some of their core pre-Islamic funeral customs and rituals. In other words, the Kyrgyz have been modifying and adapting their traditional funeral customs to new religious changes and developments by incorporating Islamic elements, but preserving the essence of their native pre-Islamic beliefs, practices, and social values. From the viewpoint of orthodox Islam, this religious syncretism in Kyrgyz funerary traditions can be characterized as

being Islamic in form, but “pagan” in content. By saying Islamic in form, I refer to those external or formal elements such as Quranic recitations and Muslim ways of burial which the Kyrgyz adopted later, and by “pagan” (from the viewpoint of orthodox Islam), I refer to many of the existing rituals of Kyrgyz death customs which are imbedded in their pre-Islamic worldview. The official or formal part of the funeral involves the participation of an Islamic clergy, i.e., the *imam* or *mullah* who carries out specific funerary practices such as *janaza* and *taziya*, according to Shari’a or Muslim way. One of the important Muslim funerary rites is the frequent recitation from Quran before, during, and after the burial. Every time a new mourner pays a visit to the house of the deceased, a *mullah* or some other family member like an elderly man recites short excerpts from Quran. Every time a female visitor or group of women enters the funerary yurt and finishes crying and greeting the mourners, a man steps into the yurt and begins reciting Quran, a sign that the women should stop crying and singing lament songs. This act gives the utmost authority to Quran, which stands above all other Kyrgyz traditional values and funerary practices. However, the Kyrgyz people, especially women do not always obey this highest authority. In some cases, some of those so-called “un-Islamic” or “pagan” Kyrgyz rituals and practices overpower Quran. For example, at my grandfather’s funeral I observed several times that when a close female relative arrived, she simply ignored the recitation of Quran by a man and kept singing lament songs loudly.

Many core rituals and customs associated with the funeral have deep roots in Kyrgyz nomadic culture, and due to this very recent historical connection, the essence of funeral customs seem to resist to the new demands and changes in time and society. In the past, both the Muslim clergy and the atheist Soviet/Communist regime opposed and



banned this tradition, but it was able to survive by modifying itself through adaptation and incorporation of new religious practices and ideas both from Islam and modern Soviet/Russian culture. The core rites of the funeral customs remain quite conservative unto this day. When I say the core of the tradition I refer to the key customs and rituals, representing the socio-cultural values and religious beliefs, which are closely associated with their nomadic culture. These main aspects are: carrying out the *kereez*, words of testament of the deceased, sending out *kabar*, bad news to the close and distant relatives and public in general, *uguzuu* (telling the family members and close relatives about the death), erecting of a yurt, *boz üy* for the funeral, killing animals (mainly horses and sheep), traditional mourning etiquette for women and men regarding their “duties” at the funeral such as the singing of *koshoks* (or *joktoo*) lament songs (for women) and *ökürüü*, crying out loud (for men), receiving and accommodating the guests with a *soyush*, i.e., allocating sheep for groups of guests no more than twelve people in neighboring yurts/houses and serving the meat according to the age, gender, and the status of guests and, finally, the burial. Burial, however, does not mark the end of funeral and mourning. There follows all kinds of mini memorial feasts until the fortieth day memorial feast. *Ash* is the final and major memorial feast, which is offered after one year or whenever the family can afford to offer it. All of these aspects will be discussed in detail later.

Different peoples in the world mourn their dead in different ways, but all cultures share common values in terms of carrying out death rites and memorial services. Like in Kyrgyz culture, in rural Greece, for example, death rites involve the sequence of memorial services called “Trisayio” referring to by the date of its occurrence: “stis tris” (at three days), “stis enia” (at nine days), and “stis saranda” (at forty days), “sto examino”

(at six months) and “stis hrono” (at one year). The forty day memorial, which is also known as “merasma,” i.e., “sharing or distribution, it is repeated one year after the death” is associated with the events in the life of Christ, during forty days after his resurrection. Christ appeared to his disciples many times until the fortieth day he ascended into Heaven.<sup>191</sup> The food that is distributed at funerals and memorial services is believed to find its way to the dead.<sup>192</sup>

Kyrgyz funerals and rituals associated with them became the main focus of my research in my hometown. I had many interesting formal and informal interviews, conversations, debates, and discussions with local elders, Muslim clergy, and my paternal uncle Mirzakal, who is the active member of the radical Islamic group Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT). The funeral of my paternal grandfather, Kochkorbay and the memorial feast for my late paternal uncle Abdikerim were the most memorable events at which I personally experienced all the important rituals and practices of a Kyrgyz traditional funeral. As a grown-up female member of the family, I carried out my duties at their funeral and memorial feasts. As tradition required, I mourned their death by singing lament songs together with my other female cousins and aunts inside the yurt. As a participant-observer, I closely observed how other people inside and outside of the yurt interacted with each other as well as with those visitors who came to pay their last respects to the deceased and express their condolences to the mourners. At my grandfather's *kirki*, fortieth day memorial and my uncle's one-year memorial feast, *jildik*,<sup>193</sup> with the

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<sup>191</sup> Danforth, Loring M. *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982. pp. 44-45.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>193</sup> From “jil,” year; a memorial feast making the one year anniversary of the deceased. Unlike the *ash*, it is carried out on a smaller scale. Many often, people offer *jildik* and *ash* at the same time.

permission of my great uncles, father, and grandmother, I videotaped some important parts of the main rituals without making my relatives too uncomfortable. Because I was a family member, no one seemed to object to my videotaping, especially when I explained the importance and value of this tradition in Kyrgyz society and thus also for my research.

I had a long and interesting interview with Moldoshev Bolot, the former director of our Kizil-Jar *sovkhos*, state farm.<sup>194</sup> Below I present excerpts from our conversation about the Islamic revival in Kizil-Jar and how it is influencing people's attitude towards Islam and to local funeral customs.

In Kizil-Jar, people's attitude towards religion [Islam] has increased in comparison to the Soviet period. During the Soviet period, it was prohibited to go to a mosque and pray five times a day. Lenin said in his time that every person has the freedom to believe or not to believe in religion. He also said that religion should be separate from the state. It is still so. When the perestroika began, even the ministers fasted during the month of Ramadan. Until today, many of them fast. Today, religious practices such as going to a mosque and praying are done by the free will of people, no one forbids praying. On the contrary, people are told openly to help mosques by donating money and other materials.

During the time of Manas [semi-legendary Kyrgyz hero], Kyrgyz believed in God. However, today's Islam did not exist at that time. During Chingiz Khan's period, too, people practiced their own native religion. Since 639 AC, after the Prophet Muhammad, we accepted the religion of Islam. Islam became spread around the world. Many peoples and nations adopted Islam. Many people left Islam and converted to other religions for the sake of money. Many poor people and beggars do so. Our government allows religious practice as long as its politics do not interfere with theirs.

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<sup>194</sup> Bolot *ake* is the neighbor of my parents, and he is retired and stays at home because of his poor health conditions. Every time I visited my parents, I would see him sitting outside on the street bench eager to talk to people who were passing by. So, when I asked him whether he would be willing to tell me about the socio-economic history of Kizil-Jar, and about the socio-cultural changes and developments that have been taking place since the Soviet collapse, he was very happy to share his knowledge and views with me. His young daughter-in-law kindly served us tea and sweets and we had a long four-hour interview, which he allowed me to tape-record.

However, today *mullahs* are prohibiting some of our customs, especially those related to funeral rites. It is right that Quran prohibits the slaughtering of any animal and eating food for the first three days at the deceased house. It is said that offering of memorial feasts such as *beyshembilik*, *kirkī*, *jildik*, and *ash* bring economic harms and hardships to the poor people. However, people do not follow them, because these customs have penetrated too deep into their blood. I said to *mullahs* for several times: “If you forbid killing an animal and if it is written in Quran, when people serve you pilaf with a *jilik*, (sheep meat’s primal cut) why do you eat it?! If you are against it because Quran says so, why don’t you just refuse the meal; do your religious service to the deceased and stand aside without eating any food?!” *Chongdor* [big shots] are also to blame. If a big shot that holds a government position and if his relative dies, he kills one or two mares. Seeing them, do you think people would stop it? When Bekmamat Osmonov, the former governor of the province of Osh [southern Kyrgyzstan] had died, we went to pay our last respect to him. The entire village was assigned to accommodate the guests. One street was told to accept guests from the Aksī region, the second from the Ala-Buka region, third from Bazar-Korgon, Nooken, etc. That is what I mean when I say that the big shots are responsible for promoting this kind of lavish events.

At my grandfather’s *kirkī* and uncle’s *jildik*, I witnessed a lot of confusion and frustration among my uncles and other townsmen who seem to have been lost in the “clash” between their pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices and orthodox/fundamentalist Islamic ideas imposed from outside and by local members of the radical Islamic groups such as the *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*. Even though HT is a banned religious group in Kyrgyzstan, its local members continue to carry out their missionary work with

the goal to reform or purify the Kyrgyz Islam by cleansing it from all “un-Islamic” elements or *bid’ah*, religious innovations. Among purist Muslim clergy is Özübek Aji Chotonov, who strongly opposes all the un-Islamic Kyrgyz customs, especially funerals rites and publishes booklets and articles on the problems of Kyrgyz Muslimness:

No matter how wonderful our customs are, since we accepted *musulmanchilik* [muslimness], we must first find out whether our customs conform to our religion or not. Otherwise, any customary act, which does not conform to the religion, makes that person an infidel. Religion is the law, decree, or order, which came from God, and no one has the right to violate it.... Our standing with one of our foot in Islam and the other in idolatry does not bring us any dignity or kindness.<sup>195</sup>

The official and orthodox Islam, Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan,<sup>196</sup> through *fatwas*, religious decrees and weekly TV program called *Juma khutbası*, also condemns many Kyrgyz traditional practices and beliefs, which do not correspond to Shari’a laws. Local Muslim activists, *dawatchıs* (missionaries) are sent out to villages and towns all over the country Through the newspaper called “Islam Madaniyati” (Islamic Culture), booklets and textbooks, Muslim clergy and theologians such as Özübek Aji Chotonov publish articles on religious issues most of which deal with the Kyrgyz funerals. They try to explain the Kyrgyz people about what is right and wrong in their religious and funeral practices. Chotonov condemns Kyrgyz funeral rites as being irrelevant to Shari’ah and Muslim values:

Among all other Muslim peoples and nations in the world, death is considered a normal and natural experience in life and funeral rites are carried out quite easily and in orderly form according to Shari’a rules . . .

<sup>195</sup> Chotonov, Özübek Aji. *Iyman sabagi (Iyman Lesson)*. Bishkek: Technology Press Center, 2002. p. 229.

<sup>196</sup> Formerly it was called SADUM in Russian which stand for “Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Central Asia” which existed from 1943-1991) has to conform to the state ideology.

Customs such as waiting for a close relative, or looking for a fat mare or money and keeping the body for 3-4 days do not exist in any other nations other than Kazakhs and Kyrgyz....<sup>197</sup>

At my grandfather's funeral and my uncle's memorial feast, heated discussions took place between Kyrgyz men and women and several local *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* members who, among many other things, oppose all un-Islamic elements of Kyrgyz funeral customs. Sitting inside the yurt together with my grandmother and my aunts, I listened to the interesting dialogues between local *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* members, among them one of my uncles, and my great uncles who know their Kyrgyz form of Islam, but lack the textual religious knowledge of Quran. My father, as an educated man and historian who is quite knowledgeable both in Kyrgyz history and history of Islam, served as a "moderator" of the discussions. Sometimes, when visitors stopped coming, I stepped out of the yurt and joined the men's discussions. The *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* members tried to use funerals to promote the ideas of their organization and to lecture the Kyrgyz on their un-Islamic customs and practices. My uncle Mirzakal insisted that his father should be buried immediately after his death and strongly opposed all the important customs and traditions of a Kyrgyz funeral, such as the erection of a yurt, slaughtering of a horse, singing of mourning songs by women, the loud crying of the men standing outside of the yurt, and many other un-Islamic rituals. However, the elders and women did not listen to him and carried out all the essential rituals according to the Kyrgyz way, because without these rituals the Kyrgyz funeral and the memorial feast would not be complete. Despite the explanations given by my uncle as well as by mullahs and imams, who base their arguments on the Quran and the Sharia'h, it was very hard for ordinary Kyrgyz to

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<sup>197</sup> Chotonov, p. 229.

imagine a funeral without the above-mentioned rituals. Many Kyrgyz feel strongly about their old traditional values and customs and use the traditional expression “*kirgizdin kanina singip kalgan*,” [these old customs] “have deeply penetrated into the blood of the Kyrgyz” to describe the significance of funeral customs, for they truly constitute the essence of Kyrgyz identity. In order to be a pious or true Muslim, i.e., obeying the *Shariah* and the Quran fully, the Kyrgyz will have to give up these sacred rites and moral values inherited from their centuries old nomadic past. Below, I will continue to discuss Kyrgyz funerals in greater detail by addressing all the major rituals and customs associated with a funeral and explaining their significance in contemporary Kyrgyz society.

### *Kereez*, Words of Testament

Among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs it is very important to carry out the *kereez*, final words or words of testament of the deceased person. The *kereez* varies in content. It can simply be wise words and blessings of the dying person to his/her children or can deal with the division of the remaining livestock or wealth of the father or valuable items or jewelry of the mother, or it could be the fulfilling the request of the dying person about his/her own funeral and memorial feast. Before his/her death, the person tells one or two of his wise kinsmen about the number of animals to be killed, whom to inform, who should wash the body and recite *janaza* prayer before the burial, where he/she wants to be buried, etc. My great uncle Anarbay described *kereez* in the following way:

When a person feels that his/her death is near, he/she tells his/her *kereez*, testament. So, to whom the father tells his *kereez*? Let's say that he has three or four children who are not married yet and still live with their parents. Their *enchis* (share) are not allotted yet. He will say: there is this

many livestock in the yard, give ten sheep and a mare to so and so, five sheep and goats to so and so, and a mare to so and so. In this way, he divides his children's shares if he has not given them before. This is one type of *kereez*.

The second kind of *kereez* is said to a *bilerman*, one who knows. He or she says to him/her: "when I die, bury me in so and so place." In other words, he/she tells where he likes to be buried. The second thing he asks is that his body should be washed by so and so. Usually, he chooses one of his *kudas* [in laws]. He says that so and so should hold my head, so and so should pour the water, etc. Then he says that a certain mullah should recite *janaza* [funeral prayer before the burial] for him.<sup>198</sup> . . . . When my father, your great grandfather died, we carried out his *kereez*. We appointed those elderly men whom he asked to wash his body and distributed the gifts to them . . .

In his descriptions of Kazakh and Kyrgyz death rites, Philestrup also mentions *kereez*: "When a person is dying from illness, or he feels his death is approaching, he tells his words of testament: he writes down (if he is literate) or he calls someone who knows to write. In his testament he says the following: 'After I die, my brothers (sons or other close kinsmen) should sacrifice one third or one fourth of my livestock in my memory and to appease my soul.'"<sup>199</sup> Furthermore, he lists the prizes (in livestock) for carrying out certain funeral rituals.

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<sup>199</sup> F. A. Phielstrup. *Iz obriyadovoi jizni kirgizov nachala XX veka* (On the Customary Life of the Kyrgyz in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), Moscow: Nauka, 2002, p. 98. F. A. Philstrup (1889-1933), who came from a Dutch family background and lived in St. Petersburg, gathered rich ethnographic material on many aspects of Kyrgyz social life and customs during the mid 1920's. He conducted his fieldwork among the central Tian-Shan, Chong Kemin, and Talas Kyrgyz in the northern part of present day Kyrgyzstan. Many of his valuable materials did not get to be published because, like many other scholars of his time, he became the victim of Stalin's repression. He was murdered brutally, i.e. he was forced to gulp boiling hot water and died in 1933. His father, who was a mechanical engineer worked at the city telephone operation of the city of Petersburg, whereas, his mother, who was English, gave private English lessons to people. The value of his material lies in the fact that he did a comparative study of Kyrgyz traditional customs and rituals between various existing Kyrgyz tribes. Moreover, he wrote down almost all the Kyrgyz terms and words pertaining to Kyrgyz social life, customs and rituals and kinship that he describes. He also gives at least the names of people from whom he recorded the story or material. Among his many other interesting ethnographic materials, the material on Kyrgyz funeral customs and rites



The importance of this tradition is also well observed and celebrated in the Kyrgyz heroic epic *Manas*. One of the famous episodes of the epic, called *Kökötöydün ashī*, the Memorial Feast for Kökötöy (Khan), is the epitome of a Kyrgyz memorial feast glorifying the life, immense wealth, and generosity of Kökötöy khan. Its rich formulaic and poetic language, as well as the vivid and detailed descriptions of all the Kyrgyz funeral customs and memorial feasts, take the reader into the glorious time of the nomadic Kyrgyz, who sacrifice everything to honor their dead, especially if the deceased is a well-known leader or khan, like Kökötöy.<sup>200</sup> On deathbed, Kökötöy tells Baymırza, close kindman, that he is leaving his countless livestock and wealth and that his son Bokmurun, and that he “should not” spend his wealth unwisely and that he should consult with Manas about his burial and memorial feast. Baymırza delivers to Bokmurun his father’s *kereez* and suggests that he should bury his father quickly in a simple way by killing just few animals. However, Bokmurun, regretting the fact that he did not get to see his father before he died and hear his last words in person, consults with Manas about how he should bury his father. Manas tells him that he should not spare his wealth and livestock, but offer a great feast and send the news to all the khans and heroes of both Muslims and infidels. Since we are dealing with epic poetry, Kökötöy’s *kereez* is told in an ironic form. There is an interesting and strange discussion between Kökötöy’s son

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are quite valuable in terms of its comparative nature. When he finds similarity or difference, he mentions also Kazakh funeral customs.

<sup>200</sup> The episode was recorded from various singers, who told their own versions, which differed slightly from each other. In the versions of two well known *manaschīs* (singers of *Manas*), Sagımbay Orozbek uulu (1867-1930) and Sayakbay Karala uulu (1894-1971). The seventy five year old Kökötöy khan is said to have seven wives, who bore him daughters, but not a son who would inherit his countless livestock and treasures. While hunting with his companions in the wilderness, Kökötöy khan one day finds a child and brings him home and offers a big feast by killing many animals. He names his son Bokmurun (Filthynose). Then when Bokmurun is fifteen years old, Kökötöy becomes very ill and calls his kinsman Baymırza and asks him to deliver his *kereez* to his son, Bokmurun, who had been away in search of a wife for himself.

Bokmurun, Baymırza and Manas about whether or not they should offer a big memorial feast. Logically, in traditional Kyrgyz society, there shouldn't be any question about *ash*, because it is an obligatory custom.

Kökötöy is a very knowledgeable and wise man. As part of his *kereez*, he gives all the names of people, Muslim and infidels and their great khans and heroes and describes in detail in which cities or lands they live and what kind of skills and powers they possess. The reader is puzzled by the nature and tone of Kökötöy's testament, for he does not want his son to offer a great memorial feast. Upon listing so many great khans and leaders to Baymırza, he then, at the end of each testament, tells not to send the news to them. Usually, the *kereez* is told in a positive sense, meaning you should do this or that. However, Kökötöy tells his *kereez* in a negative form by telling not to carry out all the important funeral customs and rituals essential in his nomadic culture. However, Kyrgyz scholars of *Manas* note, this kind of negative message is characteristic of traditional oral epic poetry. So, does it mean that Kökötöy is being just humble or stingy? As a famous khan, he should know that he couldn't be buried without elaborate funeral ceremony. Or, is there another reason for his denial of this important memorial feast? In reading the first part of Kökötöy's testament, it is quite clear that he does not want his son to offer a memorial feast and invite all the people from far and near. However, there are many poetic lines, which do not fit in the context of his message.

Therefore, one has to read between the lines and critically. Kökötöy's message has a double meaning, and there must be a good historical reason for that. The singer seems to be confused and hesitant about glorifying the Kyrgyz nomadic culture, particularly its memorial feast. It is my personal feeling that there was an outside pressure

from the Muslim clergy who opposed this most important custom of the nomadic Kyrgyz as being unfit to Sharia. The epic singer feels very passionate about the importance of the funeral customs and especially about the *ash*, but he struggles about how he can make it so that he does not upset the religious clergy. The singers were quite smart, however. They just negated the last verse line, but left the previous elaborate descriptions of the memorial feast in the positive form. To avoid confusion, the reader should read everything that Kökötöy says not to carry out; in fact he means that his son Bokmurun should do all of the things he says not to do. For example in the following verse lines Kökötöy tells his *kereez* about his burial and memorial feast ironically in a negative form:

<p>Kelgen kelin toyunday, Meni kömsün Jash baldar kılğan oyunday. Kempirdin ashı kilsin,  Kedeydin bashı kilsin. Ölgönüm, tiriligim bilinbesin, Öz jurtum bülünbösün. Eki, üchtöp kara soyungar, Elüü, kırk chapan kiyit kılıp, Eptep meni koyungar. . .<sup>203</sup></p> <p>Özöngö bütör bayterek, Ölgöngö da mal kerek, Ötürük chachip ne kerek. Tikkenden önör bayterek, Tirikke da mal kerek, At semirse jal kerek, Atası ölgön balaga Ar ish kılsa mal kerek. . .<sup>205</sup></p>	<p>May he make the funeral Like the feast for a new bride Like a game played by children May he offer the memorial feast of an old woman Or the feast by a well-off poor man.<sup>201</sup> May my life and death remain unknown; May my own people not suffer. Kill only two or three large animals, Prepare forty or fifty coats of <i>kiyit</i>,<sup>202</sup> And bury me however is convenient.</p> <p><i>Bayterek</i> <sup>204</sup>grows by the river, Even the dead need livestock, It is not necessary to waste in vain. <i>Bayterek</i> grows when planted, Even the living need livestock, Horse needs a mane to grow fat, The son whose father has died Needs livestock for any kind of deed.</p>
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<sup>201</sup> The wedding offered for a bride [and groom] and a memorial feast for an old woman are smaller than a memorial feast for a khan. It implies that the feast should be a modest one.

<sup>202</sup> *Kiyit* is a gift of clothes exchanged between in-laws. Male's *kiyit* consists of a fur coat, hat, shirt, and a pair of leather boots and female's *kiyit* consists of a coat, large scarf, dress or textile which is enough to make dress, and a pair of boots.

<sup>203</sup> *Manas*, Version by Sagınbay Orozbekov, p. 9

<sup>204</sup> *Bayterek* is the name for the "World Tree" in Kyrgyz and Turkic myth and folklore.

Then K k t y wants his son to get ready to drive his livestock to a particular valley where he will hold the memorial feast, *ash* for his father, which again contradicts his earlier mentioned *kereez* in the negative form. The singer uses traditional/formulaic verse lines, which are usually used when people get ready to move to a far away mountain pasture:

Kozusun saabay t�rk kilsin,	Weaning the lambs, he should turn them into big an fat sheep.
Kochkordu bichip irik kilsin	Castrating the rams, he should turn them into whethers.
Aygirdi bichip at kilsin . . . <sup>206</sup>	Castrate the stallions, he should turn them into riding horses.

In the following lines, Baymirza first tells K k t y's *kereez* to Bokmurun that he should invite everyone:

Adam atin ukpagan	He mentioned all kinds of people
Ar bir t�rd�u el ayt�i,	Of whom no human has heard,
"Adam uulu bolgondon	"Don't leave any one out
Asti koybo"- dep ayt�i.	Who is considered the children of Man," he said.
Adam tursun bul jakka	Not just to just men,
"Aytip kabar ber"—dedi	You should send out the news
D�o, peri tiyakka.	To the lands of giants and angels he said,
"Kabar sal dedi kalikka,	"Send out the news to the people
Baarina daam bergin dep,	And feed everyone
Dayrada jayan balikka.	Even the scorpion fish in the river.

When Bokmurun asks what his father really meant by saying that he should invite everyone and offer the memorial feast, Baymirza tells the opposite. Then Bokmurun gets very angry with Baymirza and he guesses himself:

Baymirza kak bash sen beleng?	Baymirza, are you not old and foolish!
Baladan bozoy men belem?	Am I not a young man [left behind],
Atakem aytkan kereezin	Am I not up to carrying at

<sup>205</sup> *Manas*, Version by Saginbay Orozbekov. Vol. 1, p. 9.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Kilbay koyor kem belem!  
 “Kilba”—dep aytıp salıptır,  
 Kiyamat ketip kalıptır.  
 Kiyamat ketken özü eken,  
 “Kil” dep aytkan sözü eken.  
 Akiret ketken özü eken,  
 Artındagı kalganga  
 “Ash ber”—degen sözü eken.  
 Ash bermek bizge kariz eken,  
 Atamdın aytkan arzı eken,  
 Artındagı kalganga,  
 Akir bir nuska chıgarıp  
 Ash berdirmek dartı eken . . . <sup>207</sup>

My dear father’s testament  
 He left behind!  
 Saying “Don’t do it”  
 He himself left for the other world,  
 But his word meant “Do it.”  
 He himself left for the next world  
 For those left behind  
 His word meant “Give my *ash*”  
 It is our duty to offer the *ash*,  
 It is my father’s last request, indeed,  
 It was his wish to give his ash  
 To those who remained behind  
 And thus continue the custom . . .

The hero Manas gives the following advice to Bokmurun:

Kızır chalgan Kökötöy  
 Atamdan jakın kishi ele.  
 Kariyabız Kökötöy  
 Kandik tuusun ashtagın,  
 Karkap kirk kün bolgoncho  
 Kömböy üygö tashtagın!  
 “Kan atakem öldü”—dep,  
 Kalkka kabar saldırıp .  
 . . . .  
 Ak jooluktun baarina  
 Atakelep joktotup,  
 Nark bolsun kiyinki ölgöngö,  
 Aytuu bolsun körgöngö,  
 Ayanbaylık Bokmurun  
 Atangdı jakshı kömgöngö!  
 Kilganing kalsın bir ülgü,  
 Kilimğa bolsun sözüng shar,  
 Kila ber önör ayabay,  
 Kizmatında men da bar! . . . <sup>208</sup>

Kökötöy, blessed by Kızır,  
 Was a man closer than my own father.  
 Prepare the khan banner of Kökötöy,  
 Our respected elder,  
 Until the forty days pass  
 Don’t bury him, but keep him at home!  
 Saying: “My dear father, khan died”  
 Send out the news to the people.

Make all women wear a white scarf  
 And sing laments saying “Oh, dear father!”  
 Let it be an example for those who die later.  
 Let it be spoken by those who witness it,  
 Let us not spare anything, Bokmurun,  
 From giving a proper burial to your father!  
 Your deeds should be an example,  
 Your words should ring for the centuries,  
 Do everything that you can,  
 For I am ready to be in your service! . . .

The singer also confirms the importance of this custom among the nomadic Kazakhs and

Kyrgyz:

Kazakh, kïrgiz kalıktır,

The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are people

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

Ölgönünö mal chachkan  
Oshonun narkī kalıptır . . .<sup>209</sup>

Who spent so much livestock for their dead  
The legacy of that custom remained.

Thus, fulfilling the *kereez* continues to be a sacred duty of the deceased's children and relatives in contemporary Kyrgyz and Kazakh societies. If the deceased's *kereez* is not fulfilled, his spirit is believed to be dissatisfied and thus keep coming in his children or relatives' dreams.

### *Uguzuu and Kabar beriüü*

(Telling/Breaking and Sending the Bad News to Family Members, Kinsmen and Others)

Like in many cultures, Kyrgyz funeral consists of institutionalized actions, which are implemented with the full participation of tribesmen or community. There are definite steps or measures that should be taken right after a person dies. One of the first tasks of the deceased's relatives is to send out the *kabar*, (from Ar. "qabar," "news") to all the close friends, *törkün*, family and kinsmen of the deceased's woman, *kuda-söök*s (in-laws of the deceased's married children, and to the public in general. The relatives, usually men, sit down and begin writing out "notification letters" in which they say the date and time of the deceased's *taziya*, burial or correctly the expression of one's condolence.

Contrary to Muslim tradition, the Kyrgyz keep the body of the dead at least one day, and that gives them enough time to inform those who are away. The letters are sent through *kabarchıs*, messengers who deliver them in person to the destined people. Distant relatives receive notification letters, whereas, the immediate family members are told indirectly. It is very important to inform the *törkün* and *kuda-söök* of the deceased who have to make it before and for the burial. If some of these people do not receive the news

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

and thus come to the funeral late, after the burial, they express their discontent to those family members of kinsmen, who were responsible to inform them. The late Kyrgyz poet Esengul Ibrayev, who, like many wise Kyrgyz elderly, knew all the details and obligations of Kyrgyz funeral customs. He told me the following true story which confirms the importance of informing the family members on time:

This took place in the eighteenth century. One of the ancestors of Atake biy, named Tashtanbek, who was from the Big Tinay tribe [which inhabited the Chüy Valley] had an only sister, Kümüshay, who had been married to a man in Talas [northern Kyrgyzstan]. She received the news about her brother's death too late and therefore could not make it to his funeral. So, she came to the *jetilik*, the memorial feast offered after seven days. She did not come alone of course, but at least ten people accompanied her. When people heard that Kümüshay was coming, the entire people of Chong Kemin [region in the Chüy Valley] stood on their feet and cried out loud, they say, for she was the only younger sister of Tashtanbek. Then, she entered the yurt and began singing her lament song [in which she expressed her anger towards the people who were responsible to inform her on time]:

Abılay, Sabır Chagaldak,  
 Atamdın tonduu uulu ele,  
 Atakelep ökürgön  
 At kötörgüz chong kalmak  
 Atamdın kaysı kulu ele.  
 Bulardın jegeni suur ele,  
 Kiygenderi kuur ele,  
 Koychular menen ish kılıp,  
 Kızdarı kolotko tuur ele...<sup>210</sup>

Abılay, Sabır, and Chagaldak  
 Were all my father's adopted sons,  
 You, who cry out loud saying "Atake!" (Dear father!)  
 The Big Kalmak, whom a horse cannot lift,  
 Were all my father's slaves,

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<sup>210</sup> The poet further notes: "These verse lines from Kümüshay's lament song from the eighteenth century were remembered by the people and reached to us without any written alphabet or press house. They were transmitted orally from mouth to mouth among the people. How many of such wonderful poems were lost and forgotten?!"

You were well fed with marmots,  
 And given nice belts to wear,  
 Your women got pregnant from shepherds  
 And gave birth hiding in a ravine.

In other words she sang these bitter words to her brother's adopted sons because she was upset about the fact that they did not inform her on time and that the fact they were crying out loud when she came was in vain

If the deceased was a well-known and wealthy man or woman or khan and tribal leader, the number of people to inform was also great. In the *Memorial Feast for Kökötöy*, the dying great khan Kökötöy wants the *kabar* sent not only to his people but also to all the khans and leaders of other tribes and peoples with whom he interacted, e.g., Chinese, khan Joloy of the Kalmyks, and Kyrgyz, Kökchö khan of Kazakhs, Karacha khan of the Noyguts who lives by the Lop river, the Jügörü of the Khotan, Manchu khan Neskara, Chinese khans in Beijing, Kongurbay khan of the Kechils, Temir Khan of Bukhara, Kozubek of Kokand, Malabek of Margelan, Sanjibek of Samarkand, Alabek of Altışhaar, Sınchibek of Andijan and the Akhun khan of the Afghans, The Bagish khan of the Jediger tribe in the Jeti-Özön (Seven Rivers), the Shıgay Khan of the Tekechi, Jamgırchı of the Eshteks, In other words, he invites all the Muslims and infidels together. However, the hero Manas, who was not informed about the death of the great khan Kökötöy, becomes very furious at Kökötöy's son Bokmurun and tries to attack him, but Bakay, the wise man stops him saying that it is not good to hurt Bokmurun, who is now left an orphan.

The second type of informing people is the custom of *uguzuu* i.e., letting the immediate family members of the deceased know in person about the death. The custom



of *uguzuu* in a traditional way has been lost in contemporary Kyrgyz society. *Uguzuu* was a great responsibility and difficult task and therefore, it had to be carried out by wise and eloquent people, like the elderly, oral poets or *chechens*, eloquent people or orators. According to the *uguzuu* custom, the informer should be very careful in his selection of words to tell the bad news. In the past, it was usually oral poets or *chechens* who were asked to break the bad news to the family member(s) of the deceased. They often told them the news in poetry by using metaphors or riddles from which the listener guessed or found out about what had really happened. When the well-known Kyrgyz poet Toktogul (1864-1933) returned from an exile in Siberia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, another poet and friend of his named Eshmambet broke the bad news to him about his son's death. He accompanied himself on a *komuz* and greeted Toktogul according to the poetic tradition and told him about his son's death in poetry.

In Kazakh, Nogoy, and Kyrgyz oral legends and stories we hear about a poet named Ket Buka, who is believed to have lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Chingiz Khan. According to the popular legend, when Chingiz Khan's oldest son Juchi had died in the year 1227, it was Ket Buka, who dared to break the bad news to Chingiz Khan by accompanying himself on a *dombra* (Kazakh instrument) or *komuz* (Kyrgyz instrument). Several versions of his *uguzuu* have survived.<sup>211</sup> Ket Buka, who was from the tribe of Nayman, is remembered among people to be a "great poet, respected *biy* (judge), a *chechen* who solved many social problems and also a great *komuz* player. One

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<sup>211</sup> The first written account of the poem was recorded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by an unknown Persian author. The text of the poem was later included in the historical annals called "The Ancestors of the Turks" collected by Ibn al-Asir (died in 1223). *Kirgiz el irchilari* (Kyrgyz oral poets). Ed. by Batma Kebekova. Bishkek, 1994, p. 26.

of the popular versions that have survived in Kyrgyz is as follows: When Aykhan's (Chingiz Khan) son died, no one had dared to tell the sad news. According to another popular legend, Chingiz Khan had announced that whoever would tell him about his son's death, he would kill him. Then only the singer Ket Buka approached the Khan and told him about his son's death. As mentioned earlier, *uguzuu* was a very responsible task and Ket Buka put his *uguzuu* in the form of a riddle:

<p>Tuu kuyrugu bir kuchak Tulpar kachtı Ayganım.</p> <p>Tuurunan boshonup, Shumkar kachtı Ayganım. Altın taka, kümüş mık, Duldul kachtı Ayganım. Altın tuur ordunan, Tuygun kachtı Ayganım. Altın Ordo bağınan Bulbul kachtı Ayganım. Dengiz tolkup chaypalıp, Köl böksördü Ayganım. Terek tüptön julunup, Jer böksördü Ayganım. Ala-Too kulap pas bolup, Bel böksördü Ayhanım. Berekelüü nur kachıp kachıp, El böksördü Ayganım. Törölördün urugunan, Töl böksördü Ayganım. Ağın dayra soolup, Köl böksördü Ayganım.<sup>213</sup></p>	<p>With a thick tail as an armload The <i>tulpar</i> stallion ran away, my Aykhan.<sup>212</sup> Letting himself loose from its <i>tuur</i>, The falcon flew away, my Aykhan. With golden hooves and silver nails, The <i>duldul</i> stallion ran away, my Aykhan. From its golden <i>tuur</i>, The young eagle flew away, my Aykhan. From the garden of Golden Horde, The nightingale flew away, my Aykhan. The sea waves moved, The waters diminished, my Aykhan The poplar was torn from the root, The land diminished, my Aykhan. The Ala-Too mountains collapsed, The hills diminished, my Aykhan. The blessed light escaped, The people diminished, my Aykhan. From the tribe of the <i>törös</i>, nobles The tribe became less, my Aykhan. The running river dried up, The lakes diminished, my Aykhan.</p>
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Another popular version remembered is as follows:

<p>Altın booluu ak shumkar Altın boosun tıptır, Aydı karay siziptır. Kümüsh booluu ak shumkar Kümüsh boosun tıptır, Kündü karay siziptır,</p>	<p>The white falcon with golden tether Cut through his golden tether And flew away towards the Moon. The white falcon with silver tether Cut through his silver tether And flew away towards the Sun.</p>
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<sup>212</sup> Chingiz Khan was known by this name which means "Moon Khan."

<sup>213</sup> *Kirgiz el irchilari*, p. 26

Al emine boluchu?	What does it mean?
Tuu tübüdü kök buka	The gray ox under the banner
Kündü karap öküröt,	Belows looking at the Sun
Alchagay müyüz, ak erkech	The longhorned white male goat
Aydı karap bakırat,	Cries out looking towards the Moon.
Bul emine shumdugu?	What kind of misfortune is it?
Asmandan ak ala bulut sögülöt,	White patchy clouds gather in the sky
Ayaktap möndür tögülöt,	Pouring large bowls of hail
Köktön kök ala bulut sögülöt,	Blue patchy clouds gather in the blue sky
Könöktöp möndür tögülöt,	Pouring buckets of hail
Bul emine shumdugu?	What kind of misfortune is it?

Then Chingiz Khan guessed Ket Buka's riddle and said:

Chingiz Khan:

Altın booluu ak shumkar	The white falcon with golden tether
Altın boosun tıtkanı,	Who cut through his golden tether
Aydı karap sizganı,	And flew away towards the Moon,
Al kulunum botom bolgonu,	That is indeed my foal, my baby camel.
Kümüş booluu ak shumkar	The white falcon with silver tether
Kümüş boosun tıtkanı,	Who cut through his silver tether
Kündü karap sizganı	And flew away towards the Sun,
Bul kulunum botom bolgonu.	That is indeed my foal, my baby camel.
Kultuk müyüz kök buka	If the blunt-horned ox
Tuu tübüdü ökürsö,	Cries out under the banner,
Al atası bolgonu.	That is indeed me, his father.
Alchagay müyüz ak erkech	If the long horned white male goat
Aydı karap bakırsa,	Wails looking at the Moon
Al enesi bolgonu.	That is indeed, his mother.
Asmandan ak ala bulut sögülsö,	If white patchy clouds gather in the sky
Ayaktap möndür tögülsö,	Pouring large bowls of hail
Köktön kök ala bulut sögülsö,	If the blue patchy clouds gather in the blue sky
Könöktöp möndür tögülsö	Pouring buckets of hail
Közümdün jashı bolgonu.	Those are indeed my tears.

Then Aykhan understands that his son has died and says:

Ket-ket, Ket Buka,	Git! Git! Ket Buka,
Kebi jaman it Buka,	Foul-mouthed son-of-a-Buka,
Senin aytar kebing bul emes,	That is not for you to say,
Menin ugar kebim bul emes.	This is not for me to hear. <sup>214</sup>

<sup>214</sup> These four lines were translated by my student Stefan Kamola, MA student in the Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization, University of Washington.

When Aykhan wanted to throw Ket Buka to his lions and tigers, he said:

Kızdarı sokkon kiyalday,	Like a tapestry embroidered by girls
Kiligi jakshı Ayganım,	Your character is noble, my Aykhan,
Kelinder saygan kestedey,	Like a tapestry embroidered by brides,
Kebi jakshı Ayganım.	Your words are wise, my Aykhan.
Elchi menen irchiga	For an envoy and poet
Khan aldında kay ölüm? <sup>215</sup>	There is no death from a khan.

When he said these words, Chingiz Khan is said to calm down and could not dare to kill the poet. Many similar *uguzuu* and *joktoo*, lament songs which were composed by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century oral poets have been recorded among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs. When a well-known oral poet died, it was customary among other oral poets to compose laments songs and sing at his funeral.

By giving these distant and historical accounts preserved in legend forms, I am not asserting that that every death was told in poetry or riddle form. Today, this type of informing about someone's death is no longer practiced. Many often people inform the children or parents of the deceased by lying or indirectly: "Your father is very ill and you should come/go as soon as you can!" And the children usually find out about the truth when they arrive and see the funerary yurt and hear the loud cries by men and women. For example, in 2002, when my 49 years old uncle Abdikerim died from a sudden heart attack, tribesmen did not know how to break this sad news to his children, old parents, brothers and sisters. It came as a great shock for the old parents. One of his four sons, my cousin Baatır was studying in Tashkent and someone had to go there and bring him to the village for his father's funeral. The person, who accompanied Baatır, did not and could tell him about his father's death. When Baatır entered the courtyard he saw the yurt and the men, who, seeing Baatır, quickly got up from their seats and turned their face towards

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-28.

the yurt and began crying out loud according to the Kyrgyz tradition. My cousin first thought that his grandfather passed away. According to my relatives, who witnessed the event, when my cousin entered the yurt and opened the face of the laying body, he was literally shocked seeing his own father dead. When I returned from the United States and arrived in my hometown three months later, I also found out about my uncle's death in a similar way. As mentioned earlier, I, as a married woman, settled in with my husband's family upon our arrival in our town. The next morning, my mother-in-law and my husband told me that we would be going to my paternal grandparent's house to greet them and my aunts and uncles. I was very happy, but at the same time I wondered for a moment why such a rush. It was quite warm despite the fact it was raining very hard. I put on a long, loose dress because I was seven months pregnant. We drove to my grandparent's house, which is about a mile a half away from my mother in-law's house. My husband and mother-in-law were told not to tell me anything before I arrived. We parked the car outside the gate of the house. I was very excited to see my grandparents and the others, so I ran into the courtyard ahead of everyone. On the outside porch, or verandah, were sitting my grandfather, father and other uncles and cousins, who all greeted me modestly without showing much happiness or having smiles on their faces. My own mother, who was also there, asked me to come into the other room, and took me by my elbow. When I entered the room, I saw several women facing the wall who began singing lament songs. This immediately indicated to me that someone had died in the family. I first thought that it was my grandmother, but she was one of the crying women. I had also seen my grandfather outside, so I had no idea who was dead. After a few seconds, my mother shocked me by breaking the news that my uncle, who was only 48,

had passed away while I was gone. It had been three months now. I burst out crying and screaming and threw myself onto my grandmother and cried for about fifteen minutes. The three women who sat facing the wall crying and singing lament songs were my grandmother Kumu, her oldest daughter, my Aunt Sirga, and Anarkül ene, my great uncle's wife. I could not stop crying and sobbing despite everyone's efforts to calm me down. They told me that I might harm my baby inside me by crying too hard. I felt so sad for my dear grandmother, who looked very small and grief stricken. She and her second son, my deceased uncle, had been very close indeed. My uncle had died from a heart attack in Uzbekistan, where he was living with his family. He was head of one of the two Kyrgyz families among my grandmother's children who had not yet returned to Kyrgyzstan due to their government jobs.

Like the first experience, I found out about my grandfather's death also by surprise. My husband, who had stayed in our town, had called my uncle's home in Jalal-Abad and had given him the bad news. My mother and great aunt were told the truth about my grandfather's death, but my brother Sultan, and my sister and I were told that he was very sick and therefore we had leave the city quickly. We all drove home fast. We knew that our grandfather had suffered from asthma for about twenty years, but no one thought that he would die anytime soon, because he had been feeling just fine. As we approached my grandfather's house, my brother looked down the hill and saw a yurt erected in the courtyard, and he knew immediately that my grandfather was dead. Sultan drove the car very fast, making a quick turn on to the street, and upon arriving outside the house's gates, which were wide open, he burst out crying. From this I learned that my grandfather was dead. I was holding my son in my arms, and I remember all of us burst

into tears and jumped out of the car. In accordance with Kyrgyz nomadic tradition, our female relatives came running to our car and grabbed each of us, leading us towards the yurt erected for my grandfather's funeral. I do not remember how fast I reached the yurt and threw myself onto my grandmother, who was now grieving another family loss after her son. My grandmother, two aunts, and other female cousins, all in mourning clothes, were sitting and crying out loud next to the body of my grandfather, who lay behind the curtain on the men's, i.e., the left, side of the yurt. It was still cold in March and there was no fire inside the yurt. I was given a warm coat and a large white scarf to cover my head, which symbolizes mourning.

The main reason for not telling the bad news to close family members while they are away is that they will be traveling from a far and it may take one day or many hours for them to arrive. And it is not good for them to cry and suffer inside while on the road, especially if they are traveling alone. People fear that they might experience some kind of physiological trauma. It is better if they find out when they arrive, because there will be other family members and relatives to console and comfort them.

### Funeral Protocol among the Kyrgyz

Death rites have been studied by scholars within the frame of rites of passage, theory developed by Van Gennep, who recognized that all rites of passage, including birth, initiation, marriage, and death, go through three major steps. They are "the rites of separation, rite of transition or liminality, and rites of incorporation."<sup>216</sup> In these three consecutive periods, the dead and the mourners symbolically share a common status.

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<sup>216</sup> Gennep, Van Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 11.

Danforth confirms this idea saying: “The fate of the deceased is paralleled by that of the mourners, who are separated from the rest of the society at the moment of death and pass through a transitional period before they are able to re-enter society and resume their normal relationships with others.”<sup>217</sup>

Like many cultures around the world, throughout the funeral process, mourners, both men and women, follow certain codes of behavior and dress. Social interaction is also restricted for the close family members of the deceased. We can place this special behavior within the framework of Van Gennep’s theory of rites of passage’s second stage, which he calls the “liminal” period. Danforth explains the social status of mourners in the following way: “The restrictions imposed on mourners are an expression of the fact that they have been separated from society as a whole because they continue to participate in relationship with the deceased. During the liminal period of mourning they too live in a marginal state midway between the world of the living and the world of the dead.”<sup>218</sup> Moreover, in many cultures, the color black is chosen for women as a mourning dress. As Danforth correctly “the length of time a woman wears black is determined primarily by her relationship to the deceased.” In some traditional societies, Danforth notes, a widow is required to wear black “for the rest of her life or until she remarries.”<sup>219</sup> Moreover, “women in mourning, especially the widows, lead extremely restricted lives. They do not go to the city to shop, nor do they attend social events such as village festivals, weddings, baptism, or the like.”<sup>220</sup> The period of mourning ends gradually, as

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<sup>217</sup> Danforth, Loring M. *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 37.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>219</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>220</sup> *Op.cit.*



women exchange black for dark blue or brown clothes before returning to the brighter colors of everyday life.<sup>221</sup> All of these apply to the mourning etiquette among the Central Asians, including the Kyrgyz. A traditional Kyrgyz funeral requires its participants to observe certain manners/behaviors or follow special etiquette during the entire funeral procession and mourning period. Close male and female relatives of the deceased and people who come to the funeral all know their own individual place inside and outside the yurt and their role. They need to follow certain etiquette of greeting the family members of the deceased and use certain traditional expressions to console them. There are two different forms of mourning etiquette for men and women. Men traditionally stand outside the yurt and do not usually sing laments songs like women. They simply cry out loud uttering words such as “Boorum-oy! Boorum-oy!” Oh, my liver! Oh, my liver!<sup>222</sup> or “Esil kayran boorum-oy! Atakemden ayrıldım!” Oh, my liver! I became separated from my dear, blessed father!” All relatives of the deceased start their *ökürük*, crying out loud as soon as the person dies and he is placed inside the yurt.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century descriptions of Kyrgyz and Kazakhs funeral rites by Dutch scholar and ethnographer F. A. Philstrupp do not differ much than the contemporary funeral customs. During his fieldwork, Philstrupp observed that Kyrgyz and Kazakh men

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<sup>221</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>222</sup> In Turkic culture, expressions of inner feeling are most often associated with the human’s internal organs. Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks have many expressions with the word *boor* (Kyrgyz), *baur* (Kazakh), *jigar* (Uzbek). The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz consider themselves as being *boordosh el*, meaning the people who share the same liver, i.e., related or brothers. Since both the feelings of sadness and happiness is physically related with the liver, they express them in the following ways: *Boorum oorudu* or *boorum achidi* (My liver ached or ?); *boorum ezildi* (My liver became too soft/spoiled, usually from too much crying; or *boorum katip kaldı* (My liver became hard) from too much laughter; *tash boor* (stone livered, i.e., stone-hearted, hardhearted); *boor ber/berbe* (have/not to have warm/close feeling towards someone). In other cultures, these and other similar feelings are usually associated with the heart.

cried in a half bent position holding a long stick onto which they leaned when they cried.<sup>223</sup> This interesting element has been forgotten now. According to Kazakh and Kyrgyz custom, both men and women mourners/visitors start crying out loud already from a distance as soon as they get off their horse. They approach the yurt, where the deceased is housed, on foot by walking fast and by covering their eyes with a handkerchief. When the close male kinsmen of the deceased arrive, they first approach the men outside the yurt and cry by hugging each of them. Then they enter the yurt and also cry by hugging the widow, daughters, and sisters of the deceased. After that they sit on the left men's side of the yurt and recite Quran for the deceased. Then they leave the yurt and join the men outside. Phielstrupp also describes the mourning of women, especially the widow, who traditionally, wore a black *elechek* [married women's head dress] and a black coat. Other close women relatives, including the daughters and sisters of the deceased do not wear black color clothes; they wear blue color dress and white scarf. Today, since contemporary Kyrgyz women no longer wear *elechek*, the widow replaced her *elechek* with a large black scarf, which she throws on top of another smaller scarf by closing her eyes and half way down her face. This custom is called *kara kiyüü*, wearing of the black, mourning clothes. The mourning clothes are worn until the *ash*, the main and major memorial feast offered to mark the one year anniversary of the deceased, at which through another ceremony called *ak kiydi*, wearing of the white, they change from black color clothes to white or colorful clothe and scarf. The old black clothes are burned marking the end of her mourning period. Kyrgyz women put on their mourning

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<sup>223</sup> Phielstrupp, F. A. *Iz obriadovoi dhizni kirgizov nachala XX veka*. Edited by B. H. Karmysheva and S. S. Gubaeva, Moskva: Izd-va Nauka, 2002, p. 99.

clothes as soon as they begin crying over the dead body inside the yurt. Pielstrup describes two physical positions of the mourner among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz women: “The mourner sits on a folded sitting mat and cries by leaning her upper body forward while grabbing her waist with her two hands. Among the kara Kyrgyz, the widow should sit showing her back to the door; she sits with her left leg folded onto which she rests her left hand and her right foot half folded onto which he puts her right elbow and the hand on their jaw.”<sup>224</sup> However, he does not explain the meaning of these positions. The grabbing of the waist is probably related to the liver. Some elderly women still observe this tradition and all the mourning women sit and sing lament songs by turning their back to the entrance. This is done only when they are crying and singing laments.

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., pp. 128-129.

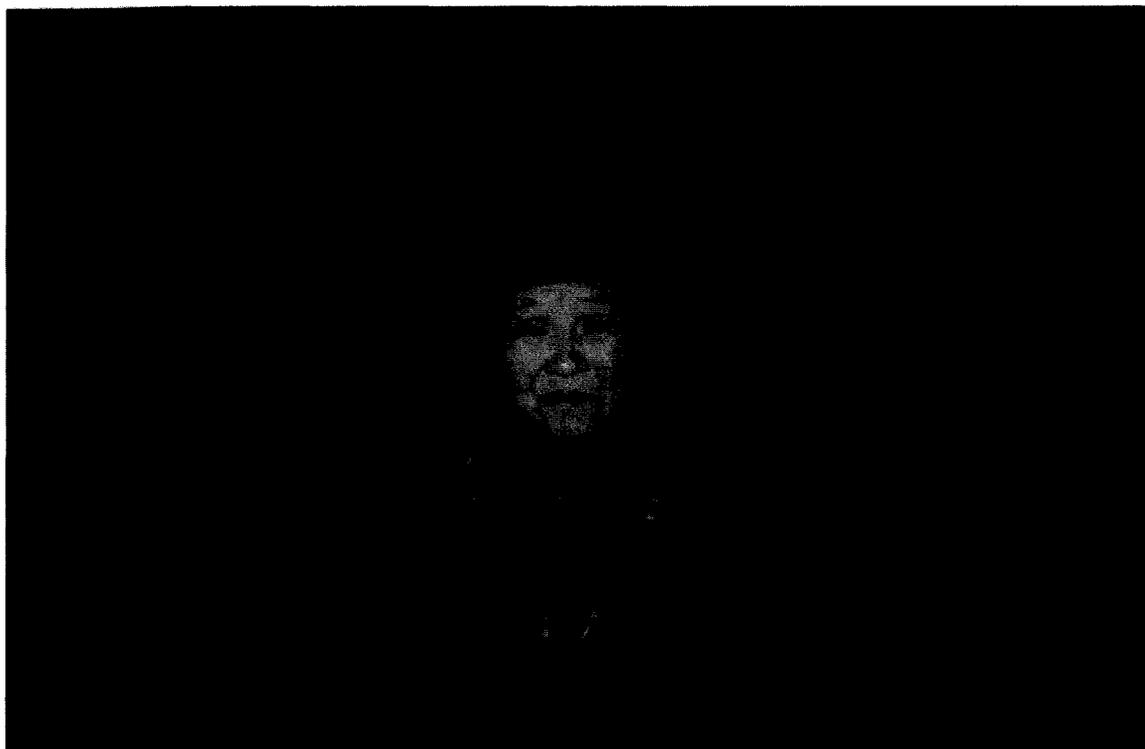


Figure 15: My grandmother Kumu in her mourning clothes sitting inside the yurt erected for my grandfather's *kirki*, fortieth day memorial feast, Kizil-Jar, 2003



Figure 16: My uncles at my grandfather's fortieth day memorial feast, Kizil-Jar, 2003

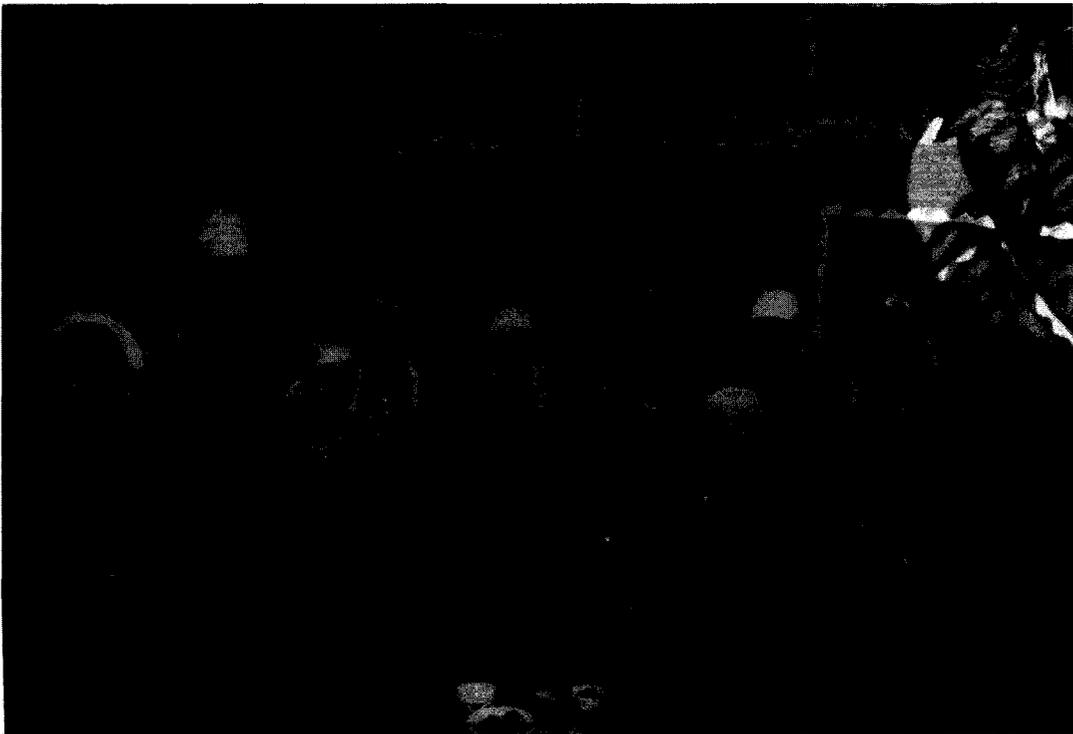


Figure 17: My female relatives at my grandfather's *kirki*, 2003

I, for the first time in my life, as a grown up woman, observed all of these customs and rituals at my paternal grandfather's funeral and at my paternal uncle's memorial feast. It would be very interesting and appropriate to discuss here my role as a participant observer for I was the member of the mourning family. When my mother and great aunt arrived in my grandfather's home for his funeral, according to Kyrgyz funeral "etiquette", other women relatives came running to our car and grabbed each of us leading towards the funerary yurt. I do not remember how fast I reached the yurt and threw myself onto my grandmother, who was now grieving her husband after her son. My grandmother, two aunts and other female cousins in mourning clothes were all sitting and crying out loud next to the body of my grandfather, who lay behind the curtain on the men's, i.e., left side of the yurt. It was still cold in March and there was no fire/heat inside the yurt. Immediately, I was given a warm coat and a large white scarf to cover my head, which symbolizes mourning. I sat grieving between my grandmother, who was dressed all in black, and my aunt, facing the curtain behind which my grandfather lay. After crying and hugging all the women relatives inside the yurt, I was told to step outside and greet my father, all the uncles and great uncles who stood outside the yurt at the men's traditional place of mourning. I first hugged my father and we both cried and sobbed for a moment, then I did the same with all other uncles.

In the first case, outsiders may wonder about why my relatives did not greet me first in a normal way, after all, I had not seen them for three years! As a Kyrgyz or as member of my clan in particular, my relatives' first sacred obligation is to inform me of

the loss of my family member and my first obligation is to visit the family of the deceased (*bataga baruu*) and recite Qur'an. And only after carrying out this ritual can my relatives and I resume our normal relationships. As described above, my grandmother and aunts followed the tradition of crying and singing lament songs facing the wall before looking at me and saying hello. Only after crying by hugging each other, which lasted for about ten minutes, I greeted them and other men and women relatives who watched us and waited until we were finished. Even my uncle Mirzakal, who became a very strong believer by joining the Hizb-ut-Tahrir Islamic group, which does not tolerate un-Islamic "innovations," seemed to feel hopeless before this old tradition.

It was my first direct experience of a traditional Kyrgyz funeral which involved my own family members at which I played one of the key roles in carrying out some of the rituals and customs, particularly singing lament songs.<sup>226</sup> When my grandfather died, I sat inside the yurt together with my grandmother, aunts and other women relatives and mourned the death of my grandfather in a traditional way by singing lament songs. In the next section I will discuss another important aspect of a Kyrgyz funeral, *koshok/joktoo*, songs of lament.

### *Koshok/Joktoo*, Ritual Lament

Kyrgyz scholars believe that *koshok*, lament song, is one of the oldest genres in Central Asian oral literature and many Kyrgyz heroic epic poems like *Manas* grew out of *koshok* songs for they reflect *kereez*, testament words.<sup>227</sup> Many scholars agree that the text of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Kültegin inscription, written in old Turkic, is in fact composed in

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<sup>226</sup> My first personal experience of a funeral in 1986 when my great grandfather Köchümkul died, but I was only 10-11 years old.

<sup>227</sup> *Koshoktor* (Ritual Laments). Bishkek: Sham Press, 1998, p. 5.



the style of *koshok* in which Kültegin uses words and expressions used in traditional lamentations. According to Allexou, “In its origin and early development the lament was an integral part of the funeral ritual.”<sup>228</sup>

Death is inevitable and a universal phenomenon. Where there is death, there is also lament expressed by mourners. One of the most essential aspects of a Kyrgyz funeral is the ritual of singing *koshok*, lamentation, in which the wife, daughter, mother, or sister of the deceased express their grief and also praise the dead by telling about his/her personality, good deeds, and characteristics. This tradition is still alive among the contemporary Kyrgyz, mostly in the rural areas. The Kyrgyz use two terms interchangeably for songs of lament, “koshok” and “joktoo” (“joktau” in Kazakh). “Koshok” is derived from the verb “kosh-“, “to put together, to add, i.e., to improvise” poetic lines, whereas, “joktoo,” which is a verbal noun, comes from “jok,” “no/is not; it does not exist” and the verb “jokto-,” means “to lament someone’s loss/non existence.”<sup>229</sup>

In my attempts to learn about the lament songs in other cultures, I found the tradition of ritual lament and its development in Greek society very similar to that of the Kyrgyz/Central Asian. In *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Margaret Alexiou studies the history and development of ritual lament in Greek tradition. The author explores the means how Greek poets of different ages “were able to draw on a common fund of ideas, themes and formulae, frequently investing an old and well-established

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<sup>228</sup> Alexiou, Margaret. *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 14.

<sup>229</sup> The term *koshok* has a slightly different meaning among the neighboring Uzbek, who call their lyrical song *qoshiq*. “Qoshiq ayt” in Uzbek means, “to sing a song,” whereas “koshok ayt” in Kyrgyz means to sing a song of lament.

convention with a new significance and contributing something of their own.”<sup>230</sup> The striking similarities are found in the historical origins and development of ritual lament as a poetic genre. In both Greek and Kyrgyz societies, oral poets played an important role in developing the ritual lament from its primitive stage to the sophisticated poetic genre. Greek and Kyrgyz ritual laments share similar compositional structures and thematic features as well as the dynamics of oral transmission.

Throughout rural Greece, it is the older women who maintain the tradition of singing laments. In most cultures, singing laments was and is still the responsibility of close women relatives of the deceased. However, as Alexiou notes during the Greek antiquity, it became customary to hire strangers or professional singers/poets to lament at funerals. The author asserts “this practice of hiring mourners began with civilization, when improvisation was considered inadequate.”<sup>231</sup> Thus, this custom was not practiced by Greeks alone, but it was rather prevalent “among the more civilized Chinese, Egyptians and Romans as among more primitive peoples, and it survives today among the Greeks and other Balkan peoples, in Asia Minor, Spain [and also in China.]”<sup>232</sup>

After the independence, Kyrgyz scholars undertook a big project by publishing multi volume series of Kyrgyz oral literature which consists of forty volumes, which includes all the genres of oral literature, except the versions of *Manas* trilogy which are being published separately. Among these forty volume series, the twenty-first volume is called *Koshoktor*, Songs of Lament. Kyrgyz scholars at the Institute of Languages and Literature made a selection of *koshoks*, which were gathered from all the regions of

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<sup>230</sup> Alexiou, p. XI.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>232</sup> Op.cit.

Kyrgyzstan. *Koshoks* have different themes: 1) *Koshoks* about well-known historical personalities, such as poets, khans and heroes; *koshoks* sung for older people; *koshoks* for fathers, husbands, or young men (sons); *koshoks* for women, mothers, and wives, and for young children.<sup>233</sup> The editor of the *Koshoktor* volume notes that “since *koshoks* are one of the widest spread genres and exist in great numbers, it was impossible to fit them all in one volume. If we were to publish all the collected manuscripts in the archives, it would exceed four volumes.”<sup>234</sup>

As in Greek oral tradition, Kyrgyz *koshoks* can also be divided into several categories. Traditionally, *koshoks* are sung by women, however, the collections of *koshoks* in the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences have *koshoks* composed by men to their deceased wives and children as well. The common characteristic is that in all *koshoks* the mourner praises the deceased by mentioning his/her good deeds and qualities. In some cases professional singers of *koshok* or oral poets were hired to compose the *koshok* for the person. Poets, who possess the skill of improvising and experience of oral epic story telling, were able to compose long lament poems in which they told about the life story by incorporating many of the elements of epic poetry by glorifying the good deeds and qualities of the famous person and mentioning his ancestors.<sup>235</sup> In other words, if the deceased is a well-known person, the *koshok* dedicated to him eventually turned into a long epic like life story.

Epic songs in general incorporate many smaller genres of oral poetry such as wedding songs, love songs, and *koshoks* or *joktoos*. If a hero dies, his wife, mother or

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<sup>233</sup> *Koshoktor* (Songs of Lament), 21<sup>st</sup> volume of the “Peoples Literature” Series. Bishkek: “Sham” Press, 1998, p. 15.

<sup>234</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

close friend begins singing a *koshok* lamenting his loss. The lament of Zulayka in the Kyrgyz epic *Kojojash* could be a good example to demonstrate this incorporation. *Kojojash* is considered to be the oldest poem reflecting the ancient totemic and animistic worldview of the Kyrgyz, who were still a hunting society. Or as the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov points out, *Kojojash* is “an ancient drama” about a hunter and hunter and his struggles with one of nature’s forces, i.e., wild animals.<sup>236</sup> In *Kojojash*, the main hero and hunter Kojojash dies after being stranded on a high cliff. After being chased by the hunter for six months in the mountains and cliffs, Sur Eçki, who is the protector of the hoofed animals grouped under the name *kayberen*, takes her revenge on the hunter by stranding him on a high cliff. Sur Eçki’s curse on the hunter is very powerful. The poet-singer uses eloquent words to express the mother goat’s anger and rage. Thus, the first part of the epic ends with the tragic death of the hunter Kojojash caused by a sacred mother goat.

The well-known Kyrgyz poet Alimkul Üsönbayev, from whom the full version of *Kojojash* has been recorded, had traveled extensively among his people, experienced their rich nomadic life, its customs such as funerals and feasts, and listened to women’s *koshoks*, mourning songs. Traditionally, when a well-known or well-respected person died, Kyrgyz invited a *koshokchu*, who sang about the life story of the deceased and his good deeds. Üsönbayev was not only a poet who was able to improvise poetry in rhyme with the accompaniment of a *komuz* but also a great *koshokchu*, a mastersinger of mourning songs. In the epic, upon Kojojash’s death, the poet sings the young widow Zulayka’s lament in a traditional form, which expresses the anguish of Zulayka. This

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

traditional rendition is emotional for both the *akin* and the audience, which reads or listens to it in Kyrgyz.

Wrapping her head with a black scarf,  
 His [Kojash's] beloved [wife] Zulayka,  
 Wailed and wept in sorrow:  
 "Unable to defeat the cliff,  
 We all tried to save the hunter.  
 Unable to help him, we let him die,  
 Now we're leaving without him,  
 For our fatherland-settlement.  
 We suffered a lot for the hunter,  
 Even if he'd lived for six more days,  
 I would have taken him to Talas,  
 ....  
 We suffered a lot for the hunter,  
 Even if he'd lived just for five days,  
 I would have taken him with me,  
 .....  
 I look and I don't see the hunter among the people,  
 Separated from the brave man,  
 We are going back now  
 To the place where my people live.  
 .....  
 My only one, your young life was short, indeed.  
 .....  
 Your birthplace was Karakol,  
 Your life was among the Kitay people.  
 To be separated from you, my hawk,  
 Was I a miserable [widow] left with a *tul*<sup>237</sup>?  
 Your kinsmen came, but couldn't save you  
 From dying on the place where you stood,  
 .....  
 Hunter, were you a man with a short life?"  
 Wearing black and mourning,  
 Crying in great anguish, Zulayka,  
 Returned home,  
 Having been separated from her partner.  
 "When my mother gave birth to me,  
 [God] had created me in this way,  
 An ill-fated and miserable person."

<sup>237</sup> *Tul* is a "doll" made from wood. In the past it was the tradition among the nomadic Kyrgyz to dress the *tul* in the clothes of the deceased person and place it inside the men's side of the yurt. The widow sat next to the *tul* and sang mourning song.

Zulayka, who is dressed in black,  
 Wept in sorrow and mourned.  
 With her five fingernails,  
 Zulayka scratched off her face.  
 If she hadn't scarred her face,  
 People would've said that she wasn't mourning  
 Her husband who passed away.  
 "Kojash, you did not rejoin  
 Your many Kitay kinsmen.  
 One whose time is up dies, they say,  
 I'm filled with lament and sorrow,  
 For I've no child in my arms,  
 Who can keep me amused.  
 We've let you be entrapped, hunter,  
 In the net snare spread by death."  
 Stopping and moving on,  
 After traveling a long way,  
 People arrived and settled  
 In their own fatherland.  
 Embers of sorrow fell upon  
 The mind of Zulayka.  
 "This woman should have remained single,  
 Instead of marrying the hunter,  
 I should have lived a normal life!  
 There is no one to count on,  
 I've no son who is strong,  
 My dear, only one,  
 How can I stay among your people?"<sup>238</sup>  
 . . . .

In the famous episode from the Kyrgyz epic *Manas, Kökötöydün Ashi* (A Memorial Feast for Kökötöy khan) the Khan's young son Bokmurun laments in the following way when he learns about his old father's death:

He had me put in a cotton [soft] cradle,  
 He had me supported when I was falling down,  
 He soothed me when I cried,  
 He had me wrapped in a white shawl,  
 He gave me honey from among the sweets,  
 He gave me the mane from the fat,  
 He gave a yearling from the trotters,  
 He gave me *shay* silk from the silk robes,

<sup>238</sup> *Kojash*. Bishkek: "Sham" Basmasy, 1996, pp. 109-110.

He became happy when he heard me laugh,  
 He became sad when he heard my cry,  
 He sacrificed a *sari bashil* sheep  
 As alms on my behalf,  
 When I disappeared from his sight,  
 He called me immediately,  
 He let me eat all the fruits on earth,  
 And let me rule alone  
 Over the entire world.  
 My father, have you gone to the next world?!  
 Unable to see me for the last time,  
 Have you depart in lament?!  
 I did not get to hear your wise words,  
 Until I returned from far away,  
 Evil death found a way to get you!  
 Preventing you from telling your *kereez*,  
 Death encircled you,  
 I was not able to see your eyes  
 While you were alive, my dear father!"<sup>239</sup>

Kökötöy's people also lament:

He was a horse for those who were on foot,  
 He stood away from tyrants,  
 He was the food for those who were hungry,  
 He was the real leader of Kyrgyz  
 Who cared much for us!  
 Now we shed our tears in sorrow,  
 Is our Kyrgyz leader gone now?!  
 He was the coat for those who were cold,  
 In this false world,  
 He possessed immense wealth...<sup>240</sup>

The khan Manas arrives at least with six thousand men. When approaching the camp of the Kökötöy, he tells his young men to cry out loud:

Atakelep ökür dep,	“Cry out loud saying ‘Dear father!’” He said,
Akiretke kim ketse,	It is Allah, who orders/determines
Alda kılgan öküm dep.	Who will go to the other world,” he said.

<sup>239</sup> *Manas. Kirgiz elinin baatirdik eposu*. Version by Sagımbay Orozbekov. Vol. 3., Moscow: Nauka, 1990, pp. 25-26.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

In the following excerpt from the same episode, we learn about the custom of *ökürüü*, men's crying out loud, among Kyrgyz men. The singer describes the hero Manas's arrival with his men in the following way:

Kalıng kīrgīz urugu

With his teeming Kyrgyz people/tribe

Keldi Manas churkurap.	Manas arrived crying out loud.
Seksen ming adam kīngūröp,	Eighty thousand men came crying,
Jer köchūrüp dīngūröp,	Their voice breaking the ground,
Chang obogo burkurap,	The dust whirling in the sky,
Chapkilaship churkurap	Riding his horse and crying
Manas kelip kalīptir,	Manas arrived suddenly,
Baarı jurt aygay saliptir.	All the people made a great hue and cry
Kazakh kīrgīz kalkīna	Thus, the tradition of crying out loud
Ökürüktün adatī	Remained from those who died
Ötköndördön kalīptir.	Among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz people.

Following Manas, the other Kyrgyz and Kazakh khans also approach the yurt by crying out loud. Also, according to Kyrgyz mourning tradition, seeing that Manas is coming, Bokmurun, who is the host and the son of the late Khan meets him by crying out loud.

Traditionally, the singing of the *koshoks* lasted until the *ash*, the anniversary memorial feast for the deceased. The last *koshok* is sung at the *ash* marking the end of the mourning. The widow and the daughters sang *koshok* every day early in the morning despite the fact there were no visitors for about ten to twenty minutes. Then for the duration of one year, they sang their *koshok* every time when new visitors arrived to make *bata*, to recite Quran in the memory of the deceased. In the past, when people led a nomadic life, when the family of the deceased moved to another pasture, the women, especially the widow, cried by singing laments while passing other settlements, so that other people know that she is still in mourning.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Phielstrupp, p. 120.



As Phielstrup also notes, Kazakh and Kyrgyz elderly women usually do not sing *koshok*, but he does not explain why they do not do so. At my grandfather's funeral, I also noticed that my grandmother was not singing *koshok* as much. I did not know this "rule" for elderly women. My grandmother, dressed in her black mourning clothes, sat silently without singing much *koshok*. When I asked her why she was not singing, she said: "It is not appropriate for an old widow to sing *koshok*. Younger widows and young women like you should sing *koshok*." Later she explained to me that it does not look good for the elderly widow to sing *koshoks*, because she has spent enough time with her old man and therefore she should not grieve much her husband's loss, but be content about her pas life with him.

In the past, soon after her husband died, the widow let her hair loose and cried frantically by pulling her hair and scratching her face. This practice has been forgotten, but in the 1920's, Phielstrup mentions that it was practiced among the Kyrgyz: "As the sign of showing deep grief, the widow scratches her cheeks, but she does it without causing a major damage to her skin. The marks of scratching should last until the yearly memorial, ash. This "aggressive" act is observed in other cultures, including Greek. Alexiou is correct in asserting "The violent tearing of the hair, face and clothes were not acts of uncontrolled grief, but part of the ritual indispensable to lamentation throughout antiquity."<sup>242</sup> In the Kyrgyz epic *Kojojash*, the hunter's widow Zulayka also follows this old practice when her husband dies tragically:

Zulayka who is dressed in black,  
Wept in sorrow and mourned.  
With her five fingernails,  
Zulayka scratched off her face.

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<sup>242</sup> Alexiou, p. 6.

If she hadn't scarred her face,  
 People would've said that she wasn't mourning  
 The loss of her husband....

### Significance of *Koshok*

Now that I have discussed the structure, function, and socio-historical context of *koshoks*, I will proceed by addressing this old tradition's continuity, and significance and relevance of *koshoks* in contemporary Kyrgyz society. Even though *koshoks* were considered as remnants of dark ages during the Soviet period, the tradition still remains strong, especially in the countryside. Due to the recent Islamic revival and reform in Kyrgyzstan, however, the tradition of singing *koshok* has been severely condemned by Muslim clergy like Chotonov:

Crying out loud next to the deceased, screaming or kicking the ground, or singing mourning songs about the deceased are all archaic, darkness, and sinful. They are all unnecessary acts.<sup>243</sup>  
 . . . crying out loud and singing mourning songs are all acts of wickedness and darkness. It is very shameful and ridiculous for person of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to carry out customs and rituals, which were practiced 2000-3000 years ago. Therefore, shariat presents us the right and easy cultural path.<sup>244</sup>

Like many Kyrgyz women and men, my paternal grandmother Kumu does not accept these accusations:

Their prohibition of crying and singing *koshoks* is not acceptable. How can you not cry when your close relative dies?! One must honor his/her spirits and deeds by singing mourning songs. One must glorify his/her life, i.e., how he/she lived and what he/she did in this world. Even when a bad person dies, one has to praise him/her in laments. In the past, a woman sang this way in her lament:

You would walk proudly on the pasture

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<sup>243</sup> Chotonov, pp. 232-233.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid. p. 229.

You could dig out a root as big as a mudock,  
 (i.e., you were very strong)  
 Even if you were disliked by people,  
 To me, you were/are my brave lion!

She then said: "I sang in the following way when my son died who was a great person"<sup>245</sup>:

Until the six arkar stars faded away,  
 I breastfed you six times a day.  
 By raising you as a good person,  
 I made people say: Wow, whose son is he?!  
 Even if six full streams are to flow into,  
 They wouldn't be enough to fill the empty lake.  
 And your sons, who are left behind you,  
 Will not be able to fill your place.  
 Even if seven full streams are to flow into,  
 They wouldn't be enough to fill the empty lakes.  
 And even if seven worlds came together,  
 Your daughters will not be able to fill your place.  
 You drove a car on a wide road,  
 However, oh, my foal,  
 You couldn't reach your goal.

To support my argument that the nomadic Kyrgyz incorporated Islamic beliefs and practices without eliminating their own existing religious system of beliefs, I would like to mention one important aspect of Kyrgyz laments. After singing about the good qualities and kind deeds of the deceased man or woman in the traditional poetic form, the singer acknowledges this inevitable fact that no one can bring the dead back to life by using expressions from Islamic faith. As the later addition or incorporation of Islamic ideas, the following expressions have become traditional closing lines in Kyrgyz mourning songs:

.....  
 Azaytayin keyishti,  
 Aylanayin jan ake (ata, apa, eje, etc.),

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<sup>245</sup> These verse liens are part of a traditional lament song. My grandmother applied the song to her son by adding the last three lines.

Aralap jürgün beyishti.

.....

Let me stop lamenting now,  
Oh, dear brother!(father, mother, sister, etc.)  
May you now stroll in Heaven (enjoy Heaven).

.....

İylagan menen ayla jok,  
Emi, Kurandan bashka payda jok.

Too much crying won't help,  
Now, there is no good other than reciting Qur'an.

In this way people consoled and made peace within themselves.

The answers that I received from people show that there is no single explanation why singing lament songs is prohibited in Shari'a. When I asked people's opinion about this tradition, many spoke in favor of it. Elderly people, like my great uncle, Anarbay recall that in their time, there were no such prohibitions by the religious clergy or mullahs. He states:

This is a very recent development that they are prohibiting the singing of the mourning songs. We, the Kyrgyz sang lament songs in which we praised the good deeds of our parents, husbands, etc. When a father died, his daughter(s) cried by singing songs saying that her father was a good *khan*, *bolush* or *biy*. This tradition existed way before these *mullahs*, and therefore, people do not listen to them. It is a tradition inherited from our ancestors and it is deep in our blood. These *mullahs* say different things . . . . I myself read the whole Quran starting from the birth of Muhammad until his death. There is nothing said in Quran about not crying over the dead. It is mentioned that one should not cry too much because one suffers from it. It is said that your children should remain behind satiated, if you have wealth, it should be left for your children. You should not leave them poor.

During my interview, another Muslim scholar Abdishükür Narmatov, who has been educated in Egypt, told me the following story about the Prophet Muhammad's daughter's grief:

Of course, if one loses one's close one, not only a person, even an animal will cry. It is impossible not to cry. Who created crying? Allah *Taala*.<sup>246</sup> When the Prophet died, his daughter cried like this: "Prophet, I suffer so much. If this suffering had reached the Day, she would have turned herself into the Night because she would not have endured the pain. If this suffering had reached the Night, she would have turned himself into the Day, because she could not stand the pain. This means that there is no objection from her side against God's fate and against her father's death. There are no words like "Oh, why did you take my father, I am left an orphan now!" Also, the Prophet would not say to people that they should not cry. When the Prophet's sixteen-year old son had died, he had hugged his son with tears running from his eyes. And someone asked him: "Oh, Prophet, we thought you would not cry?" The Prophet said: "Yes, I also cry. I cry for my child, I shed my tears for him. However, I do not say a word against God." Today, when women sing lament songs, they say words against religion: "(Oh, God,) to whom did you leave your children?! (Oh, God,) why did you take him so young! You took his life away, etc.!" One should not say such words. Women's voice should be soft and gentle; their loud voices should not disturb the men outside. One should weep silently from inside.

Elmira: *How about the tradition of men's öküriüü [crying out loud]?*

Ninety percent of those men do not actually cry with their true hearts. When we do any act, we should do it if it pleases God or if it is appropriate in Shari'a. On the contrary, we think of other people: Oh, what would the people or neighbors say (if I don't cry)? This is just a show. It is not just accepted in religion, but in human mind.

In my opinion, Abdishükür Narmatov is not realistic when he says that people, particularly women should not cry out loud and accuse God for taking their loved ones. Perhaps, in theory, one can accept that, however, in real life situations, it is impossible to refrain from weeping and crying out loud when people, especially women, lose someone

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<sup>246</sup> Kyrgyz pronunciation of Arabic "Allah Ta'la" (The Allah, the Great?)

very close to them like a parent, spouse, or child. Women lose their voice if they just screamed and cried out loud without saying anything. As in Greece, many Kyrgyz women agree that the singing of laments is better than “wild shouting and wailing as a means of expressing grief at death rituals, because such shouting is physically harming and may cause illness.”<sup>247</sup> The tradition of singing lament songs were developed naturally or out of necessity because the singing allows a person to express his/her sad feelings and grief out loud and thus release the pain and anguish inside. It is a physiological factor, expressing oneself out loud helps a person to console his/her soul and eases the heart. When Kyrgyz women sing lament songs, they are not singing or expressing their sadness to the deceased only, they have a second audience, the other women relatives and neighbors, who come to express their condolences to them. Moreover, the men who stand outside of the yurt also listen to women’s laments.

When people lose their loved ones, depending on their personality, belief and disbelief in God and Fate, understanding of this and other worlds, people express their grief and sadness verbally by engaging themselves in a dialogue form with the deceased. They ask the deceased why he/she left them behind? Or some women blame God, e.g., for taking their child or husband at a young age?

To show how tradition of singing *koshoks* continue to be practiced among Kyrgyz women in modern times, I will discuss the structure of lament songs, which were sung for and about my uncle, and who and how composed and sang them? What are the techniques of composing a lament song and how do the singers individualize its content to fit the deceased’s life.

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<sup>247</sup> Alexiou, p. 73.

My uncle's death brought such grief and anguish to my grandparents and kinsmen and for the Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities in general. People, both men and women, could not cry "softly." It was impossible for my women relatives to express their inner feelings without crying out loud and without saying any words. Most of the lines of the lament songs that they sang were drawn from traditional lamentations, which were not directly connected to my uncle's life and death. So, my father, who, together with his other brothers, stood crying outside the yurt, composed a special lament song in the traditional style following seven or eight syllables in each verse line. He handed his composition to his younger sisters inside the yurt and they quickly memorized them and sang in traditional melody. My aunts had kept the original text, which they used during singing the lament for their uncle.

Ömüring ötüp ketkiche, Ökümöt ishin atkarding. Kagilayin jan akem, Özübek elin bashkarding.	Until the end of your life, You carried out government work. Oh, my dear brother, You governed the Uzbek people.
Kashik bir kaning kalgicha, Kalk kizmatin atkarding. Kagilayin jan akem, Namangan elin bashkarding.	Until only a spoonful of your blood remained, You were in the people's service. Oh, my dear brother, You governed the people of Namangan.
Chiminday janing ötkön song, Sizdasam kayra kelbeysing. Chirkirap kaldi baldaring, Chininda ani bilbeysing.	After your soul tiny as a fly has gone, Even if I grieve, you won't come back. Your children remained screaming, But you don't really feel that.
Rais bolup kolhozgo, Aytkaning eki bolbodu. Ayla jok eken ajalga, Eliügö jashing tolbodu.	When you were the director of the collective farm, Your word was not misunderstood. There is no escape from death, You hadn't even turned fifty.
Karigan kezde kakshatting,	You left in great anguish

Kartaygan ata-enengdi, Kapilet janing ötkön song, Kaygırsak kayra kelebi.	Your old parents. Once your soul is suddenly gone, Will it return if we mourn?
Argımak attin tizginin, Bura tursang bolboybu?! Ata-enendin aldında, Jürö tursang bolboybu?!	Couldn't you hold back the rein Of your <i>argımak</i> stallion?! Couldn't you stay longer Before your father and mother?!
Buudanıngdın tizginin, Bura tursang bolboybu?! Baldaringdın aldında Jürö tursang bolboybu?!	Couldn't you hold back the rein Of your <i>buudan</i> stallion?! Couldn't you stay longer Before your children?!
Jok degende elüügö Chigıp ölsöng bolboybu?! Tuuganıngdın ichine	Couldn't you at least reach fifty And then die?! Couldn't you come and then die
Kelip ölsöng bolboybu?!	Among your own relatives?!
Kereezingdi baldarga, Aytıp ketseng bolboybu?! Ata-enengdın üyündö Jatıp ketseng bolboybu?!	Couldn't you at least tell your testament To your own children and then go?! Couldn't you at least spend a night In your parent's house and then go?!
Özübekten izat-siy	Or, did you think that you would come [to Kyrgyzstan]
Körüp baram dedingbi? Tirüüngdö kele albay, Ölüp baram dedingbi?	Upon earning the respect of the Uzbeks? Or, did you wish that you would come dead For you couldn't come while you are alive?
Ayalingdın aylasın Tappay jürdüng Apte ake! Ichingdegi sirıngdı Aytpay jürdüng Apte ake!	You were never able to please Your wife, dear Apte <i>ake</i> <sup>248</sup> ! And you never told your lament Inside you, dear Apte ake!
Bashı-közüm tashka urup, Bakırsam ordung tolobu?! Bapestep bagıp östürgön, Baldarın sendey bolobu?!	If I strike my head on the rocks and scream Will your place be filled? Your sons, whom you raised with love, Will they ever be like you?
Közü-bashım tashka urup, Kiykirsam ordung tolobu?!	If I strike my face on the rocks and scream, Will your place be filled?

<sup>248</sup> *Ake* means "older brother" and "paternal uncle" in southern Kyrgyzstan. It is also used as a term of respect for an older man.



Kiynalıp bagıp chongoytkon,	Your daughters, whom you suffered to raise,
Bozdogon menen ayla jok, Azaytayin keyishti. Aylanayin jan akem, Aralap jurgun beyishti.	Even if we lament, we are helpless, May I grieve less. My dear brother, May you stroll in Heaven.
Sizdatip aga-tuugandi, Salip bir ketting keyishti. Aylanayin Apte akem, Emi, aralap jurchu beyishti.	You left all your relatives in anguish Giving them a great suffering. My dear Apteake, May you now stroll in Heaven.

When my uncle's one-year memorial feast was held, my grandmother and aunts sang lament songs. While sitting with them and listening to their lament song inside the yurt, I was very much touched by the words of the above lament song composed by my father. Its strong sentiment inspired me and I composed extemporarily my own lament song to my deceased uncle. For the first six lines, I used some of the verse lines from the popular poem *Balam jok* (I Have no Child/Son) composed by a famous Kyrgyz oral poet, Jengijok, who laments the fact that he is getting old and has no heir to leave behind. *Balam jok*, is one of my favorite *dastans*, poems, which I sing by accompanying myself on a *komuz*. The underlined verse lines are from that poem and the rest are my own composition:

<u>Altindin jayi gulbakta,</u> <u>Algan bir jaring Kadicha</u> <u>Armanda jurot ushu tapta.</u> <u>Kumushtun jayi gulbakta,</u> Kukuktöy bolgon kizdaring, <u>Kuyüttö jurot ushu tapta.</u> <u>Altindi jezge ötkörböyt,</u> Aylanayin Apteke, <u>Aytpasam dartim böksörböyt.</u> <u>Kumushtu jezge ötkörböyt,</u> Kagilayin Apteke, <u>Kuybösom dartim böksörböyt.</u>	The place of gold is in the flower garden, You wife, Kadicha, Lives now in mourning. The place of silver is in the flower garden, You daughters like the cuckoo, Live now with grief. Gold cannot be exchanged for copper, Oh, dear Apteke, I can't ease my grief if I don't tell. Silver cannot be exchanged for copper, Oh, dear Apteke, I can't ease my grief if I don't express [it].
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In the following section of my lament song, I used the beginning lines from another poem by a Kyrgyz oral poet Toktogul (1864-1933), who composed it when he was exiled to Siberia during Tsarist Russia.

<p><u>Aylangan toonun bürkütü,</u>          Tuuruna kayra kono albayt.          Artıngda kalgan baldarıng,          Apteke sizdey bolo albayt.  <u>Aylangan tonun bürkütü,</u>  <u>Ak jerden torgo chalındı,</u>          Ak Volga mingen jengekem,</p> <p>Azapka bashı malındı.          Armanduu ushul düynödön,          Aylanaın Apteke,          A düynö artik kördüngbü?          Küyüttüü ushul düynödön,          Kagılayın Apteke,          Kör düynö artik kördüngbü?          Ech bolboso Apteke,          Elüügö chıgıp ölbdüng,          A düynö ketken atangdı,          Ardaktap abal kömbödüng.</p>	<p>The eagle which flew over the mountains,          Can't return/land to his perch.          Your children who remained behind,          Cannot be like you, Apteke.          The eagle which flew over the mountains,          Got trapped out of the blue,          My dear sister-in-law, who used to ride in a          white Volga,<sup>249</sup>          Now remained in great suffering.          Instead of this world filled with troubles,          Dear Apteke,          Did you prefer the other world?          Instead of this world filled with grief,          Dear Apteke,          Did you prefer the world of the grave?          You could have reached at least fifty          And then die, Apteke.          You could have first buried          Your father who has left for the other world.</p>
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In the following short lament song that I sang, I used the well-known formulaic verse lines from the epic *Manas*. In the epic, when the hero Manas dies, the singer describes the deep grief of his people with a beautiful metaphor. The sudden death of my uncle at the age of 48 made many people weep, including the ethnic Uzbek community in which he served for many years. So, while I was composing my own lines, I remembered these lines from *Manas*, which seemed to fit the situation of my uncle very well:

<p>Kayran akem ölgöndö,          Karagay iylap, tal iylap,</p>	<p>When my dear uncle died,          The pine trees wept, the poplar trees wept,</p>
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<sup>249</sup> During the Soviet period, the state provided government officials with Volga cars to use for their work. My sister in-law used to be driven by my uncle's driver.

<p>Kalīng jurttun baari iylap...  Karīndash-uruk baari iylap.  Özübek, kīrgīz büt keldi,  Özgöchö ele dep siylap.</p>	<p>All of the many people wept . . .  All the relatives and tribesmen wept,  Uzbeks and Kyrgyz all came  Showing respect to this unique man.</p>
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When my paternal grandfather died, my father again wrote a special lament song and gave it to me to sing.

<p>Toburchak minip julkuntup,  Top jīlkī toogo aydadīng.  Torgoydoy bolgon atakem,  Töö-Jayloo barīp jayladīng.</p>	<p>Riding fast on a <i>toburchak</i> stallion,  You drove herds of mares to the mountains.  My dear grandfather who was like a skylark,  Summered in the Töö-Jayloo pasture.</p>
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<p>Argīmak attī julkuntup  Adīrga jīlkī aydadīng.</p>	<p>Riding fast on an <i>argīmak</i> stallion,  You drove mares to the hills.</p>
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<p>Ayīldī katar kondurup,  Abayga chīgīp jayladīng.  Chuburtup jīlkī aydadīng,  Chīngīrtīp kulun bayladīng.  Cholpondoy bolgon atakem,  Chatkaldī barīp jayladīng.</p>	<p>Pitching the yurts in a row  You summered in the Abay pasture.  You drove herds of mares,  And tied their foals [to make koumiss].  My shining grandfather,  You summered in the Chatkal pasture.</p>
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<p>Temintip jīlkī aydadīng,  Tektirge kulun bayladīng.  Tegerek-Sazdī jayladīng.  Jelpintip jīlkī aydagan,  Jelege kulun baylagan.  İrisim asil atekem,  İspīni barīp jaylagan.</p>	<p>You drove mares riding your horse,  And tied foals on a hill [to make koumiss].  You summered in the Tegerek-Saz pasture.  He drove mares with glowing manes,  And tied their foals to a <i>jele</i>.<sup>250</sup>  My dear and noble grandfather,  Summered in the İspī pasture.</p>
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These new and individualized *koshoks* are the best example to demonstrate how this old traditional custom of singing laments was preserved among the women. Some elderly Kyrgyz women ask their daughters to write down *koshoks* from them while they are alive. It is very embarrassing for grown up women and daughters not to sing *koshoks* at the funeral of their close one. Not everyone has a good voice and skill for singing

<sup>250</sup> A long rope secured into the ground at the two ends. It is used to tie the foals to prevent from suckling their mothers.

them, but they must do their best anyway. Since “laments are composed, performed, and transmitted orally,” states Danforth, “. . . one authentic or correct version of a song does not exist.”<sup>251</sup> Therefore, women can draw lines from general reserve of traditional *koshoks*, by adding the “proper names, kin terms, and descriptive phrases that fit the circumstances of the deceased are inserted in the appropriate places.”<sup>252</sup>

### Deceased and the Boz üy

For centuries, the *boz üy* (lit.: “gray house” or yurt) has been an integral part of Kyrgyz nomadic culture. During the 1930’s, due to Stalin’s sedentarization policy, the Kyrgyz and the other nomadic peoples of Central Asia, like the Kazakhs, were forced to give up the their nomadic life which centered around the yurt.

Upon gaining their independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz chose the *boz üy* as their unique symbol of their national heritage. This is evident in the Kyrgyz national flag, which portrays the *tündük*, the round wooden disk of the yurt through which the smoke goes out and light enters. A yurt is a very simple, one-room, portable dwelling consisting of three main parts: *tündük*, the round top part, *kerege*, the collapsible side wings, and *uuks*, the poles connecting the *kereges* to the *tündük*. The *boz üy* has a unique architectural structure, in that not even one nail is used in its construction. The collapsible side wings are all connected to one another with leather strings. Both the dismantling and the erecting of the yurt take no more than twenty minutes each. Its coverings are made from felt made from sheep wool. It is best suited for cold and mountainous environment, practical and easy to transport on camel or horseback. The

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<sup>251</sup> Danforth, pp. 71-72.

<sup>252</sup> Op.cit.

inside of the yurt stays cool in summer and warm in winter. The size of the yurt varies according to the size of the family. Wealthy people, khans and *biys* [judges] used *boz üys* with twelve *kanats* [wing] yurts, with twelve collapsible wings, whereas, smaller or less well-to-do families used four to six *kanat boz üys*. The exterior felt covering also consists of three separate pieces, one each for the *tündük*, the *kerege*, and the *uuks*. Even though the *boz uy* consists of only one round room, the inside of the room is divided into three main parts: *er jak*, the men's side, which is to the left of the entrance, *tör*, the seat of honor, opposite to the door, and *epchi jak*, the women's side, which is to the right of the entrance. The kitchen is on the women's side. Men's coats, hats, tools and the horses' tack are all hung in the *er jak*. The family's beddings is folded and placed behind the *tör*, the seat of honor. On special occasions, in a six *kanat* yurt, one can host about twenty to twenty five people.

During the Soviet period, yurts were rarely used, except for funerals. After the 1930's, due to the Soviet's sedentarization policy, most nomadic Kyrgyz gave up their yurt and began switching to mud houses. During the WWII, according to my grandmother, among other things like wool socks, people were ordered to give their yurts to the front to house soldiers in cold places. All those yurt were not returned, of course. As a result, later the state was not able to provide the herders with regular yurts with felt coverings. So, instead, they equipped the *chabans*, herders with canvas coverings, which were lighter than felt coverings, but cold inside. My grandparents and great uncles took care of the state livestock for more than forty years and they lived in *chatir*, a yurt with canvas coverings. The wooden structure of the *chatir* was different than the traditional frame of a yurt, which consisted of four or six *kanats*, collapsible wings.

Although the Kyrgyz gave up their nomadic life half a century ago and no longer live in yurts, the yurt is now often used for special occasions. These include family feasts, weddings, anniversaries, and most importantly, funerals. After the Soviet collapse, like other newly independent non-Russian nation states, the Kyrgyz experienced the process of national awakening by reviving and reinventing their cultural past. In the early and mid 1990's, the independent Kyrgyz government, in close collaboration with native intellectuals and writers, sponsored many national grand celebrations. These included 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic *Manas* (in 1995), the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the [birth and Death date of the?] well-known Kyrgyz wrestler Kojomkul (1990), and the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kurmanjan datka. These grand celebrations all took place in wide mountain pastures and valleys, where the people could erect hundreds of yurts and play traditional games on horseback. Almost all of the villages, formerly called *sovkhos* and *kolkhos* (state and collective farms), towns and cities in Kyrgyzstan sent beautifully decorated yurts to these celebrations. People remember the three-story yurt from the city of Osh, which was displayed at the *Manas* celebration in 1995. The state gave prizes to the most beautifully decorated yurts. From the sky, the yurts resembled hundreds of large white eggs spread out on the wide green pastures. The whole nation was the witness to these grand displays of yurts, symbol of nomadic culture. These celebrations inspired many Kyrgyz, especially those living in the countryside. Many families, in particular the women, became interested in having a yurt in their own courtyard next to their permanent house. I remember when the women in my hometown, including my own mother and our neighbors, became very involved in making felt coverings for their iron yurts (*temir boz üy*) which had almost the exact shape of a traditional yurt made from wood. The tradition

of making wooden yurts was almost forgotten and many people ordered heavy yurts from iron, which can neither be folded nor transported to the mountains. People liked this kind of yurt because they did not have to maintain it, as they would have had to do with a wooden yurt. Moreover, once erected, the iron skeleton of the yurt lasts for a lifetime. People painted their iron yurt red, blue, or white, and used traditional felt coverings, which they made themselves, for exterior and interior decoration. Those who do not have an iron yurt borrow from those who have for special occasions, and they transport it by a tractor.

In summer of 1995, when I returned from the United States after having studied for a year, my mother put up her own iron yurt, with colorful decorations for the first time. It was a very special “welcome home” for me. Upon entering the courtyard of our brick house and greeting everyone, I was led towards the new yurt erected under the shade of high grape vines. Before entering the yurt, according to tradition, my mother circled a bowl of water three times over my head, then I spat into the bowl. This ancient ritual signifies the purification of a person returning safely from a long journey. This ‘welcome-home’ party, at which many peoples were gathered, was also, in a way, the opening ceremony or presentation of my mother’s yurt to our relatives and neighbors. My mother was very proud of her work, into which she put so much effort and passion. Inspired by mother’s yurt, our neighbors also bought their own iron yurts and installed them in their courtyards. During my subsequent home visits from the United States, I noticed that almost every third family had at least the skeleton of an iron yurt standing in their yard. They decorated the yurt only for special occasions.

The erection of the yurt is mandatory among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs for funerals. For example, in the Kyrgyz epic *Kojojash*, when the hunter Kojojash dies by falling from a high cliff upon chasing a mountain she goat, his kinsmen, even if they did not the body, returned to their camp and immediately erected a yurt for the funeral:

Thus the Kitay returned  
 And settled in their camp,  
 Loosing their hope for Kojojash,  
 The Kitay settled down quietly.  
 The *ak örgöö*<sup>253</sup> of Kojojash,  
 Was pitched away from the camp,  
 A *tul* was placed in the *kapshīt*.<sup>254</sup>  
 Zulayka, dressed in mourning dress  
 Sat there weeping and singing laments.

...

A spear with a flag was placed on the yurt,  
 Zulayka sat crying by the *tul*  
 And singing a mourning song.<sup>255</sup>

The yurt erected for a funeral does not differ much from a regular yurt in terms of its decorations. Some people, particularly in the north, cover the front exterior of the yurt with a colorful rug onto which they hang a large portrait of the deceased, which is Soviet influence. In the past, as the above verse line show, when a man died, it was customary to place a spear on the funeral yurt with a black, red, or white piece of fabric tied on its tip. If the deceased was a young man a red color cloth was tied, if he was a middle aged, black color cloth, and if he was an old man, the spear had a white fabric.

Some feasts may take place without a yurt, but not a funeral and memorial feast because all the important rituals and customs of the funeral take place inside and outside

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<sup>253</sup> *ak örgöö* is a large size yurt with white felt coverings. Historically, *ak örgöö* was mostly used by khans and tribal leaders.

<sup>254</sup> *kapshīt* is the place where two *tuurduks* (felt coverings) of the yurt. In this context, the *tul* is being placed in the men's side, i.e., left side from the entrance.

<sup>255</sup> *Kojojash*, p. 110.



the yurt. The yurt stands at the center of all funeral procedures. It houses the dead for at least one or two days before the burial (if the deceased is male he will be placed, on the men's side, if the deceased is female, she will be placed on the women's side, the deceased's body is washed inside the yurt behind the curtain, female mourners sit inside beside the deceased's body and sing lament songs, and male relatives sit on a bench outside the yurt on the side where the body lies. According to Kyrgyz funeral etiquette, all visitors should approach the yurt, greet the family and close relatives of the deceased, and dedicate Quranic recitations to the dead.

The yurt remains erected throughout all the initial memorial feasts. These include the *beyshembilik*, Thursday memorial, *jetilik*, seventh day memorial, and the *kirkī*, the fortieth day memorial. After the *kirkī*, the yurt is put away until the *jildik* or *ash*, which is the most important and final obligatory memorial feast, held on the one-year anniversary of the death. In the past, when the Kyrgyz led a nomadic life, people did not usually erect a separate yurt for the funeral; the deceased was housed in the yurt where s/he lived with his/her family. All the guests who came from far away were housed and fed in neighboring yurts. Bellow Esengul Ibraev puts everything in context:

For example, each nomadic settlement consisted of about thirty *tütiins* [yurts/households]. They did not have a hotel or restaurant to accommodate the guests. Therefore, people hosted their guests who come from near and far places in their yurts. Twenty people fit in one yurt. The neighbors divide the tasks among themselves, e.g., one family kills this or that animal and hosts these many people, the second family cooks the *boorsok* [traditional fried bread cut in small pieces]. This brought people together at good and bad times. It is not like the rich exploited the poor, but rather the outcome of real life necessities

Today, Muslim reformist movements like Hizb-ut-Tahrir are opposing, among many other “pagan” customs, many of the rituals and practices of a Kyrgyz funeral, which center around the yurt in which the deceased is laid. People are told to bury their dead within twenty-four hours, according to Sharia law. However, Kyrgyz people simply cannot obey this religious “law” due to their strong adherence to their traditional nomadic values and pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices. Burying the dead on the same day or as soon as possible would eliminate many of the important rituals and customs of the Kyrgyz funeral. The Kyrgyz consider it very important for the close relatives who live far away to see their deceased family member before the burial. In addition, *boz üy* is quite practical for receiving the hundreds of visitors who come to pay respect to the deceased and express their condolences to his relatives. By placing the deceased’s body inside the yurt, male and female relatives can spend some time, at least one full day, next to the body, and express their feelings by singing lament songs. My great uncle Anarbay summed up why the Kyrgyz need to erect the yurt for the funeral:

We, the Kyrgyz did not have any other house than the yurt in the past. We hold it close to our heart. It is very practical. People feel comfortable in it. The deceased’s body is placed on one side of the yurt and relatives sit near the body. We keep the body for at least one or two days. The Uzbeks do not have a yurt and they also do not keep the body overnight. They cry by staying away from the body, whereas; we cry sitting next to the body. It is a sign of respect to sit close to the deceased. We want the deceased to leave being grateful to us.

Erecting yurt, especially for a funeral and memorial feast will continue among the Kyrgyz. As the Kyrgyz say: “Kyrgyz was born in the yurt and will die in the yurt.”

### Horse Sacrifice and Quranic Recitations

Animal sacrifice for rituals and other special occasions has always been an integral part of socio-economic life and culture of the nomadic peoples of Eurasia, including the Kyrgyz. For every social gathering or event, may it be a feast, wedding, a life cycle ritual, or funeral; the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs kill a sheep, goat(s), and horse(s). The nomadic Turks and Mongols of Eurasia in general showed their hospitality for their guests by killing a sheep. This custom is very much alive in Central Asia, mostly among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz, who consider killing an animal, usually a sheep, in honor of their guest(s) as the highest degree of hospitality. For large events such as a wedding, funeral, or memorial feast, *ash*, depending on the social status of the deceased and the number of people invited, in addition to killing several sheep, the host family kills between one to five horses. In the past, when every Kyrgyz family raised livestock, killing an animal did not cause much economic problem.

Since the time of their domestication, horses have played an important role in Eurasian nomadic society. They were used as transportation during seasonal migrations and when waging wars against enemies. The horse was also the most valued animal to be presented as a gift for tribal leaders, khans during their elections, as well as for foreign dignitaries. Also, the horses constituted the main part of the bride price paid by the groom's parents. Moreover, almost all the major traditional games are played on horseback. In all the heroic oral epics of Central Asia, the horses are glorified as their owners, the heroes, for it is the great horse, which makes the hero a real hero. All the horses of the main heroes have names and personality depending on their color, statue, and skills. And, finally, the Eurasian nomads are among the very few people in the world

who eat horsemeat and only people who make a drink, *koumiss*, from the fermented mare's milk. Since the time of its invention, for over two thousand years, koumiss has been the most favorite summer drink of the Eurasian nomads, who, until this day, continue to make it by using the ancient processing techniques. Since the diet of the Eurasian nomads consisted of primarily meat and milk products from animals that they raised, people developed a special food culture and traditional cuisine based on meat and milk. Thus, the legacy of that centuries old nomadic culture, in which animals, especially horses, occupied a special place, remains strong in contemporary Kyrgyz and Kazakh society. Killing a horse or sheep for a special occasion has become like a law in the society and not killing an animal equals to losing one's identity as a Kyrgyz or Kazakh.

Today, the ethnic identity of modern Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who consider themselves Muslim, seems to contradict with their religious identity, which is being influenced by the new wave of Islamic revival and reform. Along with many other traditional customs and rituals associated with funeral, which discussed earlier, modern Muslim reformers condemn the sacrifice of a horse for the funeral as the act of dishonoring the deceased and the family in mourning. Among the active Muslim ulema, scholar/clergy, who severely condemns this custom is again Özübek Ajı Chotonov:

Of course, parents are considered sacred, however, one should show respect to them when they are alive, one should kill the animal and feed them with its meat when they are alive... There is no need to build monuments and tombs on graves like the Europeans. On the contrary, muslimness does not allow waste, showing off, boasting and arrogance. It is the duty of a human being to do kindness on the right time, to take care of one's parents and respect them when they are still alive.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Chotonov, pp. 228-229.

In the past, when Kyrgyz lived in yurts, they did not cook any meal inside the yurt where the deceased lay. In the mountains, people did not have courtyards like in sedentary settlements. Therefore, there seems to be a misunderstanding among the Muslim clergy when they say that the Kyrgyz should not kill any animal and thus should not cook food for three days at the house where the death has occurred. The neighboring Uzbeks observe this rule, because they do not keep their dead in a yurt, whereas, Kyrgyz, who also live in permanent houses like the Uzbeks, erect a separate yurt in their courtyard to place the deceased's body. However, they kill an animal, mostly a horse or cow on the same day of death, and cook the meat in the courtyard, not inside the yurt. Large *ochoks* are dug on the ground or they use ready portable iron *ochoks* and place very large iron cast cauldrons in which they cook the big chunks of horsemeat. The purpose of the animal sacrifice for the funeral is twofold: first of all, the horse is killed to honor the spirit of the deceased. Secondly, the cooked meat of the horse is offered to the people.

I interviewed both local elders and Muslim clergy about the custom of killing a horse for funeral. The Muftiy of the Kyrgyz Republic, Murataali Ajı Jumanov had the following things to say in regard to this custom:

Sharia is not against the slaughtering of a mare if it is killed in honor of the deceased. However, it is against wasting. It is wrong to cook any meal at the house where the death has occurred for the first three days. It is the neighbors' job to do it at their house. After three days, however, they can kill whatever they want. One has to kill an animal with a genuine wish so that he does not suffer economically. For example, let's say that someone's father died. The *aksakals* [white beard men/elderly men] will ask him what he has. Many people will come to the funeral. They will tell him that he must find a cow (or mare), ten kilograms of rice will not be enough, you should get hundred kilos, they say. If you do not have a cow, you should borrow from someone. Yes, there are *tuugan-uruks* [relatives/kinsmen] from the same tribe, who usually help him. However, those poor people suffer by trying to be like the wealthy. On average, they

have to pay off their debt for six or seven years. Sharia says do the thing that you can afford.

Since I am from the south, people there are more religious. Many religious leaders were educated in the Nookat region. Two peoples, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz live there. The customs of Uzbeks conform to sharia. They do not erect a yurt for funerals and they bury their dead on the same day. Women do not sing lament songs. Men stand in a row outside of the house (not next to the body) and cry out loud for a short period.

Thus, according to Jumanov, it is permitted to kill a mare or horse in honor of the deceased, but the killing of any animal and offering its food to people should be done after three days. He is right that some families cannot afford to fulfill some of the main requirements of their tradition and whereas some well-off or wealthy families use the occasion to show off. However, such cases are quite rare and majority of people bury their dead without complaining about the expenditures.

My great uncle Anarbay, like many other Kyrgyz elderly in Kyrgyzstan, grew up observing all the traditional Kyrgyz customs, most importantly the customs and rituals associated with funerals, and thus speaks strongly in favor of them:

**Elmira:** *Anarbay aba [uncle], the Muslim clergy says that sacrificing an animal for the deceased is not accepted in Shari'a.*

**Anarbay:** How can I not kill any animal when my parents are dying?! For what reason did they raise and educate me? Even mullahs cannot stop this custom. When a person dies it is allowed to slaughter an animal among the nomadic peoples. It is permitted for them. Slaughtering of an animal is also in honor of the deceased. If you just bury him without any rituals, he will go away just like that. However, our father raised three of us, including his many grandchildren. Since he has done a lot of service to us, we must return that service. We tried our best to help and respect him when he was alive, but we must also send him to the other world with the same dignity and respect. It is not good to bury him immediately right after his death as if you are happy to get rid of him. This is our Kyrgyz custom, but there are some cases when people bury the dead immediately. The tradition of killing a mare will continue. That is for sure.

**Elmira:** *Why a mare?*

**Anarbay:** Right, nowadays, not everyone can afford to kill a mare. Only those who can afford kill the mare. Those who cannot afford it slaughter a *torpok* [one-year-old cow] or *kunajin* [two-year-old female cow]. The mare's meat does not freeze. If you kill a cow today, you have to finish eating its meat by tomorrow, because beef fat gets frozen as soon as it is taken out from the cauldron. You cannot eat it, it will congeal in your stomach.

**Elmira:** *That animal, is it killed in honor of the deceased or to feed the guests who come to the funeral?*

**Anarbay:** In honor of the deceased's spirit and to show respect for the spirit.

**Elmira:** *Let's say that there is a poor Ogotur [our clan's name] who cannot afford to slaughter a mare for his father's funeral. Can he just kill a goat or sheep and bury his parent or relative?*

**Anarbay:** Such a thing does not exist. There are two hundred sixty Ogotur *tütüins*, [household/family] in Kizil-Jar. Even if the parents were poor such a thing would not be allowed. If that would happen, we, the Ogoturs collect money, thirty *soms* (80 cents) from each household. If two hundred of them give the money, there will be six thousand *soms* (\$150 US) for which one can buy a *tay* [a yearling]. So, we would give money to that family.

**Elmira:** *So, mare is slaughtered on the same day a person dies and its meat will be offered to people. However, in addition to that, we slaughter sheep as soyush for special group of guests and relatives.*

**Anarbay:** Well, the *uruk-tuugans* [kinsmen] and *kuda-sööks* or *kayin-jurt*, [the deceased's married children's in-laws] come as soon as they hear the bad news. Some of them come from far away and some come from a close by village. These people will stay overnight at the deceased's house, because they are the deceased's *kudas*. This is our tradition. Even if there are ten in-laws, they will all stay there overnight [i.e., until the body is buried]. If you are wealthy, you allot one sheep for three or four in-laws who will eat the lamb that night for dinner. However, they do not come with empty hands. They bring money in the amount of 1000 or 2000 *soms* (\$25-\$50US) or most often bring a live sheep or goat. This is to honor the deceased. If they do not bring any, they will get on their head! [He laughs]. Since they will be honored and offered a *soyush*, they should also

preserve their honor. This is our ancient custom. In some places, they overdo this tradition. If they have five *kudas*, they kill five sheep for them. Here, we are much more disciplined. However, mullahs prohibit this, too. But the majority of people do not obey, because they do not want to lose the tradition transmitted from their ancestors. During the Soviet period, even *raykoms* [district governors], were fired from their position for killing an animal for their parent's honor. Still, this tradition continues.

Bolot Moldoshev, the former director of the Kızıl-Jar state farm shares similar thoughts and explanations on this custom:

**Elmira:** Would you kill a mare if your close relative or parent(s) died?

**Bolot ake:** As a Kyrgyz, I would. Because many relatives and *kuda-söök* will come. For example, if they come from Talas and Chatkal, they would not sit hungry. One should take them to another house and give them food. Secondly, it is a honor/pride thing. If my father or mother dies, if I bury them without killing any animal, after leaving the courtyard, people will talk about it. They will curse me saying that I was not able to offer one mare or cow for my late father. When I was still serving as a director of the state farm, big shots governing the region forced us to ban the slaughtering an animal and other rites. At that time, our *aksakal* [white-bearded man] named Anarbay, who lived on the Mayli-Say street, had passed away. Akbar [his neighbor and relative who served as the village council] and I went there and held people back from either killing mare nor sheep. The elderly listened, but they left for somewhere. After awhile they returned with a leg/thy of a cow and said that they bought it from a butcher and they will prepare meal for those coming from far away places. In fact, they had slaughtered a live cow. You see, the Kyrgyz can do such things.

The second major issue dealing with Kyrgyz funerals, according to Muslim clergy and according to Shari'a, is wasting or overdoing, i.e., killing not one but several mares, which is usually done when a well-known person such as a government official or close relatives of well-known personalities dies. This was practiced in the past among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs when a tribal leader or khan passed away. The kinsmen



killed dozens of horses and hundreds of sheep to feed the people in the camp and other tribal members who come from other mountain pastures. The size of the funeral and number of animals to be killed is contingent upon the social status of the deceased. In other words, the more a person is known/popular and has high or special social status in the society or in the tribe, the more people will know him/her, and thus more people/visitors will come to his/her funeral. At such events, the whole clan of the deceased is “mobilized” to serve and host the guests who come from a far. Since the social organization of the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs was based on clan and tribal system, its legacy remains strong, and as members of the same clan, people offer their help and service voluntarily. Below, Bolot ake describes the funeral of the relative a well-known government official:

**Bolot ake:** Another funeral we attended was in Kechüü<sup>257</sup> when Jumaliev’s<sup>258</sup> brother had died from a car crash. We brought three yurts with us from Kizil-Jar to house special guests. In Kechüü, they did not have nice yurts that could be used for dignitaries. I told men working at the village administration that they boast a lot when they are in other places, but they do not have a decent yurt in the whole village. At that time, Jumaliev was a Prime Minister. Everyone, all ministers, provincial and regional governors, except Akayev [former president], came to the funeral. One of them brought a truck full of rice, one brought flour, the other the animals to be killed. Poor Toko [his full name is Toktogul, one of the influential administrators of Kizil-Jar and who is from the same clan of Jumaliev, which is Machak] brought a *navaychi* [baker] and *ashpozchu* [pilaf cook] from here. We brought almost everything, including the dishes and yurts. Then, in the evening, Matake [another well-known former government official from Jumaliev’s clan] summoned me and told that our yurts will host only ministers. He told me that we should have nice and clean hand towels and dishes arranged properly, first the bowls for soup and plates under them for meat and pilaf. We came back to Kizil-Jar, gathered nice dishes and towels from our local inn and other families

<sup>257</sup> Kechüü is the name of a mountain village in the Aksı region of southern Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>258</sup> Kubanichbek Julamiev was the ex-prime minister of the Kyrgyz Republic during Askar Akayev’s presidency, which lasted until March, 2005.

and delivered those necessary items at night. There was killed not one but two mares.

As Bolot ake also notes, the northern Kyrgyz “are worth” when it comes to killing mares. In major cities like Bishkek, if a “big shot” dies, yurts will be provided immediately. If a person dies and he/she has three daughters, each of his sons-in-law brings a mare to be killed. In Narın and İsik-Köl areas, if the deceased a wealthy person, up to 5-6 mares are killed. In Bolot ake’s opinion, it is hard to ban this tradition among the Kyrgyz unless “the big shots” stop it first. He also blames local mullahs, who, in theory tell people not kill any animal, but in reality, when are called to carry out the *janaza* prayer for the deceased, they eat the meat, which is served to them. Like Bolot ake, many people are against over killing animals for funerals and memorial feasts. Yet, they also cannot seem to deny the fact that this ancient tradition will never disappear for it penetrated too deep into the blood of the Kyrgyz. Bolot ake mentioned one case in Kızıl-Jar when the older sister of the town’s well-known brigadier died. At that time the raykom [district governor] was very strict about funeral rites and killing animals. Only *mastava* [rice and vegetable soup] was served for people who went to pay tribute to his sister. When people were leaving the burial, when they were about hundred meters away, many of them walked away cursing the host: “Damn you, how could he send off people with *mastava* as if we were Uzbeks for him?!”

Since Bolot ake mentioned about the over killing of mares for funerals, it would be appropriate to give the following excerpt from my formal interview which I conducted with a well-known Kyrgyz poet Esengul Ibrayev, who died from an illness in 2005, at the age of seventy one. He and his wife lived in a nice and big apartment in Bishkek. Like

many Kyrgyz elderly intellectuals, Esengul Ibrayev grew up knowing and observing both Kyrgyz traditional customs as well as the secular life under the Soviet system. He was full of traditional wisdom and knowledge, and as a poet, he spoke very eloquently and proudly when he talked about Kyrgyz culture. Below, Ibrayev gives a detailed account of the funeral of a well-known man in his home village in northern Kyrgyzstan:

About four or five years ago, in the village of Ming-Bulak, which is located in Narin, the father of a well-known man passed away. About four thousand men accompanied the dead to the burial ground. When we looked down from the burial place, the end of the line/crowd reached the house. Men alone were four thousand, but we do not know how many women came to the funeral. I am sure there were at least two thousand women. So, all together six thousand people. And do you think three mares would be enough for six thousand people? Therefore, eleven mares were killed. The host family did not kill that many mares because he wanted to show off. Of course, not all of the mares were killed by them alone. The deceased has daughters and son-in-laws who bring a mare each. His sons bring a mare each.

I myself go from here to Narin by my Volga if one of my relatives passes away. I leave for Narin as soon as I hear the news and it takes six hours to drive there. However, the deceased will be buried the next day and where should I stay and eat? Yes, I could come on the burial day if I leave at four o'clock in the morning, I will be there at ten o'clock, which would be close to the burial (which is around 11 or 12pm.). However, not everyone has a car like I do. Some people come by bus and some hire a taxi. This necessitated people to kill animals to host the guests . . .

### Sacrifice Dilemma: To Whom is the Animal Sacrificed?

In his thorough study of Kazakh domestic religious rites, Bruce Privratsky notes that Central/Inner Asian nomadic culture, "oil (fat) and smoke were/are symbols of prosperity."<sup>259</sup> The occasional rite of *jit/is chigaruu* (Kyrgyz) or *iyis shigaru* (Kazakh) by frying *boorsok/jeti nan/shelpek* pastries in hot oil and producing smoke from oil is a

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<sup>259</sup> Privratsky, p. 133.

common in Central Asian families. On some Thursdays or Fridays, women fry these pastries and dedicate Quran to the spirits of all deseeded relatives and ancestors in general before eating them. If they do not observe this practice, people fear that they are not properly honoring their deceased ancestors whose spirits “come in dreams as a reminder.”<sup>260</sup> The recital of the Quran serves a “link between the pure way of Islam and the Kazakh ancestor cult.”<sup>261</sup> During regular days and after regular meals, people all say amen and “brush their faces” with both hands. However, after Thursday or Friday meals (if they remember), a male or female elderly member of the family recites a very short passage from Quran. In other words, Quran and Quranic recitations are considered sacred and powerful forces and thus used as verbal tools to honor the deceased spirits.

According to Jolbaris Qoja, one of the Kazakh men whom Privratsky interviewed, “animal sacrifice (*qurbandiq*) is offered to God” whereas, *qudayi* (Pers. *a holy thing*), another common religious practice, which involves a sacrificing of an animal (usually a goat) is offered to ancestor spirits. The native Kyrgyz term for the practice is called *tulöö*, which is mostly used among the northern Kyrgyz. It should be noted that *kudayï*, is not just offered for ancestor spirits, but for various purposes as well, such as when a family member sees an unusual dream (often involving deceased ancestors), upon one’s safe return from a far away place (all Central Asian families hold a *kudayï* feast when their son(s) return from the army or when their student children come back from abroad), or if one survives a potentially deadly accident. The family who is offering the *kudayï* invites relatives and neighbors for meal(s) prepared with the slaughtered animal’s meat in addition to the above-mentioned pastries. Privratsky tries to demonstrate that the origin of

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

many of these major religious practices and beliefs, including the ancestor cult, observed by Kazakhs goes back to Islamic/Sufi religion. He concludes by saying: “So the Kazakh domestic cult is linked, first to the funerary tradition of Muslim pilgrimage and the cult of the spirits associated with it, and is consistent, secondly, with a more generalized Islamic concept of the days of the week.”<sup>262</sup> At the same time, however, he cannot deny their pre-Islamic existence. He states “whatever hearth ritual may be said to have existed in Inner Asia before the coming of Islam, it has undergone substantial Islamization.”<sup>263</sup> He further acknowledges the fact that “because similar practices were present in Inner Asian religion before Islam, the assimilation of Islamic funerary laws was easier.”<sup>264</sup>

In general, scholars of Islam and Muslim clergy say that Quranic recitations can be performed at many rites of passages and for various purposes such as to honor the dead at funerals and memorial feasts, and to cure the sick. According to all four legal schools of Islam, *mashabs*, reciting the Quran for the dead is not required, but recommended (Ar. “mandub”). It is said that neither of these schools condemn this practice.<sup>265</sup>

Some purist Muslim clergy, however, in Kyrgyzstan like Chotonov do not tolerate such practices where people recite Quran to honor the dead and the ancestral spirits and ask for their support and help: “It is considered sin to ask for help from the dead and *arbak* [deceased’s spirit which also includes ancestral spirits]. These acts exclude them from being Muslim.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>266</sup> Chotonov, pp. 232-233.

During my interview with Abdishükür Narmatov, the former president of the Institute of Islam in Bishkek, he gave the following clarification about the dedication of Quran:

**Elmira:** *When I ask people about to whom they dedicate the animal; they usually say to make the deceased's spirit content.*

**Narmatov:** Yes, they say so. They also say: "I kill this animal in the name of God." The right way is to say: "I sacrifice this animal for my father's spirit in the name of God."

**Elmira:** *Why do you think the Kyrgyz respect the arbak [deceased's spirit] very much that they offer various types of memorial feasts which involve sacrificing of animals and paying visits to their gravesites and reciting Quran? Don't you think that deceased peoples' spirits have some kind of power and therefore they are highly respected and worshipped by people? Is there a connection between spirits and God, i.e., spirits being a mediator between God and the people?*

In the beginning the Prophet also prohibited people's visits to graves, because people had very little knowledge about religion. Later, the Prophet himself would visit gravesites and tell: "Oh, my friends, *sahabas*, and Muslims! I used to tell you not to visit graves before. Please do visit them, but don't ask the spirits of the dead for help. It is every person's sacred duty to recite Quran in dedication to them. However, its difference from the religion is this. Whenever I go to my home village, I visit my older brother's (who died at the age of forty seven) grave and recite Quran. It is my sacred duty as a sibling and as a Muslim. I should not forget him. However, there are some people who go to gravesites asking for something, e.g., asking for a child if they do not have children. This is outlawed in shari'a, because when we pray five times a day we say the *fatiha* sura [the title of the first sura of Quran] "yakaana budu va yakaana stayin" meaning "I only worship You and ask from You." We must ask for kindness and evil from God. *Arbaks* cannot help us. On the contrary, they are in need of our kind work. We do not need their help.

**Elmira:** *How about the popular/traditional blessing among the Kyrgyz: "May the spirits of so and so protect us!"*

No, that is incorrect to ask for their protection. Where do these blessings come from? It is because they do not understand the religion more deeply.

Saying that one's grandfather's spirit should bless or protect one is not in our religion [i.e., Islam].

When I asked my great uncle Anarbay's opinion about the tradition of reciting Quran in honor of the deceased he spoke very defensively about it:

No, that is nonsense! Now, on Thursdays and other days as well, we do *tilavat* [recite Quran) after the meal saying: "We dedicate the prepared meal's *soop* [merit] to my father's or mother's spirit. This is our ancient Kyrgyz tradition. This tradition of worshipping and respecting the ancestral spirits came to existence before mullahs. Mullahs are not able to ban this belief. Mullahs just pretend pitying the poor. We say that if a person cannot afford to carry out all the funeral rites, let him do as much as he can, no one forces him to do everything. However, as I said earlier, relatives usually help that person by gathering money. What is the use of him, if he cannot find one horse or cow to slaughter in honor of his parents who raised him/her carrying him on his/her back!

For the nomadic peoples of Eurasia, as Ibravev noted correctly earlier, killing an animal for special events came out of real life necessity of feeding large number of people, who come from a far. In the past, the nomadic Kyrgyz did not have much choice accept meat to serve their guests. People usually waited for major feasts as memorial feast to be held in autumn when all the animals are fat. The legacy of food culture stemming from their nomadic past never seems to end. People killed an animal even during the Soviet time, but they were afraid to kill more than one and to feed many people. Today, due to the Islamic revival triggered by the outside influence, local Muslim clergy is problematizing the animal sacrifice for funerals and memorial feasts as "wasting" and "showing off." Killing more than one mare is not wasting, but feeding all the people. Wasting any food is never allowed in Kyrgyz culture. All that meat are eaten

by people and even the dogs get to indulge themselves by eating the bones filled with best fat. When outside religious and cultural values are imposed on local Kyrgyz values, people become very defensive of their customs, and they become the site of contestation between promoters of Islam and of "our ancient customs" or other ways of talking about Kyrgyz things.

### Significance of *Ash*

The offering of *ash* (Kyrgyz) and *as* (Kazakh) (lit.: food), the last memorial feast for the deceased, is a major and mandatory tradition among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs.<sup>267</sup> Or, as Privratsky notes: "In Kazakh the word *as* is reserved usually for the feast on the anniversary of death or many years later and is the most elaborate of all calendrical feasts."<sup>268</sup> The deceased is not forgotten after the burial. Many cultures around the world have their own way of remembering the deceased's spirit. His/her spirit is remembered by close relatives, who have the obligation to offer periodic memorial offerings. These memorials are mostly held in the form of a food offering and animal sacrifice. Among the Kyrgyz, there is a range of small and large memorials, which have to be offered following the death of a person. My great uncle Anarbay gives a short overview of those memorials among the Kyrgyz:

The deceased is gone. After three days, his/her clothes will be washed and worn by his children and close relatives. Each Thursday after his death, until his *kirkı* [i.e., fortieth-day memorial feast], a sheep will be killed and Quran will be recited in his/her

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<sup>267</sup> Among the Uzbeks, *osh* has a different connotation. Only men are invited for *osh* and it is held early in the morning.

<sup>268</sup> Privratsky, p. 141.



honor. Relatives will come and prepare *ash* [rice pilaf] and *shorpo* [soup] for those who come paying respect to the deceased's spirit. At his/her *kirkī*, a bigger animal, cow or mare is killed. Relatives do not come with empty hands. Within a year, *jildik* [a yearly memorial feast] is offered where another mare or cow is killed. The final feast in memory of the deceased will be the *ash*, which can be offered whenever the family can afford it. That is the end of all memorial feasts. This tradition will continue, because it survived the Soviet period. *Ash* is one of the main qualities, which make Kyrgyz real Kyrgyz. No one can eliminate these customs, because they were created before Quran, together with the Kyrgyz.

My maternal uncle Askar confirms the significance of *ash* and talks about his obligation before his late father and people:

I myself have been a herder for many years raising livestock. When I die, my many livestock will be inherited by my son(s) and he will have to kill only one mare for me so that my spirit goes content. However, I think those small memorial feasts like *beyshembilik* [first Thursday memorial] and *kirkī* [fortieth day memorial] at which animals are killed, are extra expenditures, which are not necessary. In the past, the Kyrgyz did not have any *beyshembilik*. *Kirkī* was a simple custom. However, the *ash*, a big and final memorial feast was our real custom. Usually, when a man died, a mare was slaughtered with the idea that he will ride it in the other world. When a woman died, a cow was killed so that she can milk it and drink. The soul of the sacrificed mare will go to the other world with the soul of the deceased and the people, who in turn recite the Quran in dedication to the spirit of the deceased, eat its meat.

It needs to be noted that in the past the older Kyrgyz like my uncles were not that interested in what is and isn't true or authentic or old Kyrgyz custom. Like many ordinary Kyrgyz, they did not and could not distinguish clearly what is Islamic and what is un-

Islamic in their religious practices and rites. Due to the outside and local influence of purist Islam, they now consciously talk about with these questions.

To commemorate the fortieth day seems to be common in many cultures. Today, most Kyrgyz commemorate the deceased's *beyshembilik* (first Thursday memorial after the burial) and fortieth-day memorials, which they incorporated after the adoption of Islam.<sup>269</sup> However, among all the memorials, the Kyrgyz consider the latter as their sacred obligation. The offering of *ash* is a sacred obligation of the deceased's children, especially his sons and male kinsmen. Without the *ash*, no funeral rite is complete. In other words, the *ash* brings a closure to the mourning of the relatives and to the deceased's spirit to be content forever. As my uncle noted above, the *ash* can be offered whenever the relatives can afford it. Sometimes, due to various reasons, it takes some families fifteen to twenty years to offer this big memorial. During the Soviet period, many government officials and Party members could not offer *ash* for their parents and close kinsmen and they only did it after the Soviet collapse. In addition, as Privratsky notes correctly, one of the reasons for a long delay of an *ash* was due to the financial problems of the family. "In Soviet propaganda the *as* feasts were railed against as waste

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<sup>269</sup> It is important to mention that among the contemporary Kyrgyz, after the *kirkī*, close family members, such as the grown-up married children (both male and female) and brothers and sisters of the deceased go to their own home and immediately the next day offer a separate memorial called *Quran okuttu* (Reciting Quran in deceased's memory). Women neighbors and relatives cook bread in a *tandoor* and *boorsok* in hot oil. Men kill a sheep and cook rice pilaf, which is served to the visitors. If the mourner is female, she sits in one of the guest rooms of her house facing the wall in her mourning clothes and cries by singing lament songs to each female visitor. Each woman brings a scarf to the mourner and puts it on her head. If the mourner is male, he just greets the visitors outside in silence. In big cities, where people do not have all the necessary facilities for cooking large amounts of food and for accommodating large number of guests, people rent large restaurants. They just bring the sheep for mini memorials such as *beyshembilik* and a mare for large memorials such as the *kirkī*, fortieth and *ash*.

of money, but attending these domestic funerary meals is a basic form of social intercourse everywhere in Kazakhstan and throughout Central Asia.”<sup>270</sup>

### The Concept of Generosity in Kyrgyz Society and in Their Heroic Epics

From the Islamic/sedentary point of view, offering of *ash* among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, is seen as being wasteful and harmful economically for it involves a lot of work and killing small and large many animals. To show the scale of this very large social event it is appropriate to mention here again the famous episode from the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, “Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan.” Kökötöy’s son Bokmurun offers a splendid *ash* for his father.

Mayutka kelgen el toldu  
Keng Tashkenden talaaga,  
Talaada, üydö orun jok,  
Dalayı kirdi kalaaga.  
Atası üchün zarp kılğan  
Esep jetkis düynösün  
Ne dese bolor akiri  
Er Bokmurun balaga!  
Tündügünö bee soyup,  
Tüshtügünö tay soyup,  
Jaginaga koy soyup,  
Ölgön kishee toy soyup,  
Sarı ayakka bal koyup,  
Kazi kertip jal koyup,  
Jüz ming ögüz mal soyup,  
Jüdögöndör kark toyup.

The people who came to the feast  
Filled the wide field of Tashkent,  
No place was left on the field and in yurts,  
So many entered the city.  
He spent his countless wealth  
For his father’s sake,  
What can one say  
About this boy, the brave Bokmurun!  
He killed mares on the north side,  
Yearlings on the south side,  
Sheep were killed for day time guests,  
Offering this feast for the deceased man,  
He served honey in large yellow bowls,  
Chopped *qazi*<sup>271</sup> and served *jal*<sup>272</sup>  
He killed a hundred thousand oxen,  
All the destitute people indulged  
themselves.

This excerpt shows a great influence of Muslim funeral customs mentioned side by side with those of nomadic Kyrgyz. Then Bokmurun gets ready for the big and final memorial

<sup>270</sup> Privratsky, p. 144.

<sup>271</sup> It is a sausage made from the fat of the mane and chest of the horse. It is considered a delicatessen among the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs.

<sup>272</sup> Is is sausage made from the yellow and thick mane fat of the horse.

feast, the *ash* for his father. As the following lines tell, offering an *ash* was the responsibility of the entire tribe or clan. Bokmurun gathers his people and tells that they need to get ready:

Bakardın sütün köldösün, Maldın baarı töldösün. Büyüldan bölök eki jil, Üchüñchü jilda ash bersek Aga-ını, jurtum amal kıl. Kochkordu bakkın, türk bolsun, Kozunu bakkın, irik bolsun. Taylaktı bakkın, töö bolsun, At bakpagan jöö bolsun.	May the milk of cows increase, May all the animals give birth. Two years from now, We will give the <i>ash</i> in the third year, My brothers and kinsmen get ready. Tend your rams, may they be whethers. <sup>273</sup> Tend the lambs, may they become fat. Tend the baby camels, may they be camels, May those who do not tend their horses be on foot.
Badachı baksın siyirini, Bayıtsa kuday kiyirimı, Badachı baksın uyunu, Arbisin üydün buyumu. <sup>275</sup>	May the cowboys <sup>274</sup> tend their cows, May God increase my wealth, May the cowboys tend their cows, May the treasures of the house increase.

Bokmurun tells his kinsmen to take all the necessary things from his treasure house and save their livestock for the *ash*. Everyone likes the idea and prepares their livestock.

When the time for the *ash* is near, people await the *ash* eagerly:

“Ashtı kachan beret?” - dep, Adamdın baarı buk boldu. Er semirip erikti, “Kiyındar kelse körsök dep”-dep, Kız-kelinder jelikti. Kishında buura kürküröp, Kırgızdın jurtu dürküröp, Jazında buka ökürüp, Jaandagı jürgöndör Ash berbeyt dep ökünüp, Aygirdın baarı kishinep, Akırıp teke titirep,	Saying: “When will he offer the <i>ash</i> ? Everyone became impatient. The young men became strong “We will see who the strong men are” The young women were excited. In winter time, herds of male camel ran, All the Kyrgyz people were in high alert, In spring time, the ox bellowed, Those who were left in the rain Became impatient until he offered the <i>ash</i> , All the stallions whinnied, The male goats’ flesh trembled [from being fat]
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<sup>273</sup> Big and fat sheep.

<sup>274</sup> *Padachı* is a herder who takes care of other peoples’ cows for which he gets paid.

<sup>275</sup> *Manas*, p. 57.

Kochkordun baarī süzüşüp,  
Kozunun baarī türk bolup,

.....

Jatkandan maldar tura albay,

Bukalar moyun bura albay,  
Kotusu tolup koynotko,  
Kan Kökötöy ölgönü  
Kabarī tiyip oyrotko. . .<sup>276</sup>

All the rams butted with one another,  
All the lambs became big and fat

.....

The animals couldn't stand up [because they  
were so fat],

The bulls couldn't turn their neck,  
The ravine was filled with oxen.  
The news of Khan Kökötöy's death,  
Reached to all the people in the world...

We need to keep in mind that exaggeration or hyperbolic descriptions are one of the main characteristics of epic poetry. These lines show that the *ash* was a very big social event among the nomadic Kyrgyz. For outsiders, especially Muslims from sedentary societies, killing a large number of animals for funerals and the memorial feasts is considered wasting or showing off one's wealth. However, if we look from the perspective of Kyrgyz nomadic socio-cultural values, these aspects of the *ash* would not be considered as waste but as a sign of generosity, particularly the khan's generosity and care for the poor. Wealthy men like khans and tribal leaders among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs had the responsibility to take care of their own tribes and clans including the poor and the needy. This social obligation is mentioned almost in every Kyrgyz heroic epic in which the main hero or khan offers a big feast at which all the needy people, such as the poor, widows, and orphans are fed and clothed and given horses and other animals. In other words, among the nomadic Turks, including the Kyrgyz, the khan's generosity, besides being virtuous, was highly valued and expected. Therefore, in order to justify the "excessive" or "wasteful" Kyrgyz traditional feasting in the past and at present, we need to turn to the oral epic songs in which we learn about the main socio-cultural and economic values in Kyrgyz nomadic society such as funerals, *ash*, and weddings. Many

<sup>276</sup> *Manas*, Saginbay Orozbekov, Vol. 3, 1984, pp. 59-60.

of these heroic epics foster the ideal image of the hero or khan by depicting him as being generous. The idea of generosity is usually expressed with fixed formulaic verse lines. These formulaic verse lines appear in almost all the Central Asian Turkic heroic epic songs, but most frequently in Kyrgyz epic songs. It is important to note that the concept of generosity has remained quite stable from the 8th century Turkic runic inscriptions until the early 20th century epic songs. However, the formulaic verse lines describing the khan's deep concern and generosity later became more flexible to accommodate changes of time and culture, and the singers of different epic songs elaborated the notion according to their knowledge and compositional skills.

We find the origin or the traces of these verse lines describing the generosity of a Türk khan in the 8th century Orkhon Inscriptions, which according to some scholars are believed to be the earliest reflection of a heroic epic song. A Kazakh scholar, Mürzatay Joldasbekov states that the Orkhon Inscriptions not only list historical facts, but rather are our earliest example of the heroic epic, in which the desires of the Türks and their continuous fights with their enemies and the courage of their heroes are sung out loud.<sup>277</sup> The following verse lines are from the Kültegin inscription, which was also found in the Orkhon region. I argue that these distinct formulaic verse lines are only used in the epics and they most likely serve as the root version for the later elaborate versions in other heroic epic songs. They occur in the Kültegin Inscription three times as a fixed formulaic speech:

Yalan budunu tonlīg,  
chīgan budunug bay qiltīm

I made thenaked be clothed  
and the poor people rich.

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<sup>277</sup> Stebleva, p. 72.

az budunug üküsh qıltım<sup>278</sup>

I made the few people many

Qanıq qaganqa bashlayu  
Baz qaganıq balbal tikmis  
Ol törüdü üzä  
achim qagan olurtu

My uncle, the *qagan*, first erected Baz *qagan*  
as a *balbal* for my father, the *qagan*.  
In accordance with the customs,  
my uncle succeeded to the throne.

Ächim qagan olurıpan

After my uncle, the *qagan*,  
succeeded to the throne

türk budunug yichä itdi igiti  
chıganıq bay qıltı  
azıq üküsh qıltı<sup>279</sup>

he organized and nourished the Türk people  
He made the poor rich and  
the few numerous

Qagan olirip  
joq chıgan budunıq qop  
qobratdım.  
Chıgan budunıq bay qıltım  
az budunıq üküsh qıltım.<sup>280</sup>

After being a *qagan*,  
I made the nonexistent, poor people  
numerous  
I made the poor people rich  
I made the few people many

These verse lines are quite fixed in their poetic structure and use of words and they are only to be found in epic poetry. It is important to mention that in addition to his noun epithets such as generous, gray maned, brave, etc., the Kirgыз hero Manas is very often referred to as "the one who collected those who went astray and created a nation of those who were defeated and scattered everywhere" (Chachılgandı jıynagan, chabılgandı kuragan). Interestingly, we find the extended versions of the same verse lines in most Kirghiz epic songs. A similar idea of taking care of the poor is found in one of the great episodes of the Kirghiz epic *Manas* called "Kökötöydün ashı" (The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan). Kökötöy is an immensely rich khan from the Nogoy tribe. He takes good care of his people and when the time comes for him to die, he tells his *kereez* words (i.e. "words of testament") to one of his kinsmen:

Oo, Baydın uulu Baymırza, batır,  
Ee, beri karap kulak sal, batır,

Oh, (my) hero Baymırza, son of Bay,  
Look at me and listen carefully, (my) hero,

<sup>278</sup> Stebleva, p. 80.

<sup>279</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>280</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73.

Teli kush saldım, kush kıldım, batır,	I caught a young falcon and turned it a hunting bird, (my) hero,
Tentigen jüyip el kıldım, batır	I gathered those who went astray and created a nation, (my) hero,
Kulalı saldım, kush kıldım, batır,	I caught a vulture and turned it a hunting bird (my) hero
Kurama jüyip el kıldım, batır	I collected the independent tribes and created a nation, (my) hero
.....	
Menin bir közüm ötkön song, batır	After I die, (my) hero,
Jöö jürgön jakırğa	Catch an ordinary horse and give it to the poor
Chobur bir karmap bere kör, batır,	Who go on foot, (my) hero.
Jılangach jürgön jakırğa	Take off your coat immediately,
Chapan bir chechip bere kör, batır <sup>281</sup>	and give it to the poor with no clothes, (my) hero.

In this extended version, we mostly find parallelism, which is most characteristic of the Kirghiz traditional epic poetry. Perhaps, a good explanation for the development the extended versions lies in the assumption supported by Charles Beye who assumes that the Greek bards spent a lot of time “learning the old theme and phrases and remade them to their own view.”<sup>282</sup> The same is true with the epic singers of Central Asia. In the case of the formulaic description of the hero/khan’s generosity, the singers keep the old traditional theme of giving livestock, food and clothes to the poor, but they further elaborate the theme by using more semantically and metrically suitable words. Another variation of the same theme is found in another part of the same epic, but by the hero Manas’ father Jakıp bay, who was also very rich, but did not have a child until his old age, which is typical for Central Asian Turkic heroic epic songs:

Baarın jüyip bay Jakıp  
Öz üyünö kirgizdi,

The rich man Jakıp gathered all the people  
And invited them into his yurt,

<sup>281</sup> R. Sarıpbekov, *Kökötöydün ashı*, (A Memorial Feast for Kökötöy), Bishkek: Ala-Too Press, 1994. p. 12.

<sup>282</sup> Beye, Charles Rowan. *Ancient Greek Literature and Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 7.



Birden ichik, bir kımkap  
 Er bashına kiygizdi.  
 Karalaman kalganga  
 Sarpaydan üç jüz ton böldü.  
 Becharanin baldarı  
 Toy jemekke barganı.  
 Beline joluk kur berdi,  
 Berbey kaldım degenge  
 Besh tengeden bul berdi.  
 Etterin alıp etektep,

To each of his man  
 He gave a silk coat.  
 To the remaining crowd  
 He distributed three hundred coats as gifts  
 Children of the poor  
 Came to eat at the feast.  
 He gave them a sash for the waist,  
 To those who said I did not give  
 He gave them each five coins  
 They filled the hems of their clothes

Jambash alıp,  
 Atası jok jash baldar  
 Közdörünö jash alıp.  
 Bakdöölöt menen Chiyirdi  
 Oshol bakırlardı chakirdi.  
 Chakirip alıp kashına,  
 İrami kelip jashına,  
 Bir-birden chapan kiygizdi  
 Jetimderdin bashına<sup>283</sup>

With meat and received rump meat  
 The eyes of fatherless young children  
 Became filled with tears.  
 Bakdöölöt and Chiyirdi (Jakip's wives)  
 Sumoned those children  
 Before them  
 Pitying the young children,  
 They placed a coat  
 On each orphan's shoulder.

The following passage is from another eponymous Kirghiz epic, *Er Tabildi*. The theme of generosity is repeated three times in the epic, but it varies in each situation. The singer feels that he has to mention the hero's generosity, but he feels quite free in terms of the choice of words in delivering that message:

San kara boz baygeni,  
 Takir aydap keldi emi.  
 Eldin baarin chogultup,  
 Enchi kilip berdi emi.  
 Jesir katın bar bolso,  
 Jetimishten koy berdi,  
 Jetim bala bar bolso,

He drove in numerous black and gray race  
 horses  
 And brought them all.  
 He gathered all the people,  
 And presented (the horses) to them.  
 If there were widows among them,  
 He gave each seventy sheep,  
 If there were orphan children,

<sup>283</sup> *Manas*, Version by Sagımbay Orozbekov, 1995, p. 119

Jeti saan uy berdi.  
El ichinde kedeyge,  
Eki booz bee berdi.  
Esi ketken kempirge,  
Eki narcha töö berdi.  
Dubanaga at berdi,  
Duduktarga ton berdi,  
Kalenderge tay berdi,  
Kayirchiga koy berdi<sup>284</sup>

He gave each seven milch cows  
 To the poor among the people  
 He gave two pregnant mares.  
 To the hopeless old woman,  
 He gave two camels.  
 He gave a horse to an almsman,  
 He gave coats to the mute people  
 He gave a two-year old horse to the dervish  
 He gave a sheep to the beggar

We see quite an extensive artistic development in traditional poetry. As long as the singer keeps the traditional theme and elaborates the root version and keeps the traditional poetic structure, the audience is reminded of its use and do not get bored from listening to the same idea over and over. In this passage the singer consciously tries to keep the initial alliteration, which adds color to the poem's music and diction.

Another feature is that the text of the 19th and 20th century epic songs show the influence of Islam, but more likely of Sufism, for the singers updated the list of the traditional characters, namely the orphans, widowed and poor, by adding another group of religious figures such as *dubana*, a Muslim beggar; a *kalender*, dervish-like saint; *kojo*, (khoja) those who trace their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad; *moldo*, mullah; and *eshen*, a Sufi leader.

In the following variation, the hero Er Tabildi himself addresses his forty companions by telling them how well he took care of them. The singer again tries to include every possible word that is suitable to the formulaic poetry's grammatical alliteration and metrical structure until he runs out of combinations:

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<sup>284</sup> Timibekov, Aktan. *Er Tabildi*, Frunze: "Kirgizstan" Press, 1970, p. 188.

Jetim kelgen balanï,  
Enelüü kildim, kirk jigít.  
Jergesiz kelgen balanï,  
Jengelüü kildim, kirk jigít.  
Jalgiz kelgen balanï,  
Toptuu kildim, kirk jigít.  
Jalin jürök ermichek,  
Ottuu kildim, kirk jigít.  
Jöö kelgen balanï,  
Attuu kildim, kirk jigít.

I made those who came [to me] as orphans  
 To have mothers, (my) forty companions,  
 I made the boy who came without land  
 To have a sister-in-law, (my) forty  
 companions,  
 I made the boy who came alone  
 To have friends, (my) forty companions,  
 I made the weak of heart  
 To be fire, (my) forty companions,  
 I made the boy who came on foot  
 To have a horse, (my) forty companions,

Tang tamasha oyunga,  
Shattuu kildim, kirk jigít.  
Jardï kelgen balanï,  
Malduu kildim, kirk jigít.  
Boydok kelgen balanï,  
Jarduu kildim, kirk jigít.  
Chabal kelgen balanï,  
Alduu kildim, kirk jigít.  
Külüktü berdim minsin dep,  
Küröö berdim kiysin dep.  
Kürdööldüü joogo bettешse,  
Küymönböstön kirsin dep . . . <sup>285</sup>

I arranged all kinds of feasts and games  
 and made him happy, (my) forty companions,  
 I made the boy who came poor,  
 To have cattle, (my) forty companions,  
 I made the boy who came single,  
 To have a wife, (my) forty companions,  
 I made the boy who came weak  
 To have strength, (my) forty companions,  
 I gave him the stallion to ride,  
 I gave him a coat to wear.  
 So that when he attacks the furious enemy  
 he will not be afraid.

The following four lines are also from the same epic but they appear towards the end of the epic and they are short in contrast to the above two variations:

Jetimge enchi mal berip,  
Jesirge kiyim, ton berip,  
Dubana menen balchïga  
Sadaga kilip pul berip <sup>286</sup>

He gave cattle to the orphans,  
 He gave clothes and coats to the widows  
 He gave money as alms  
 To beggars and fortunetellers.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 282

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., p. 324

Both of these excerpts recall the formulaic verse lines in the Kültegin Inscription, i.e., “I gave clothes to those without clothes, I made poor people rich and few people many.” Both deliver the same traditional idea of generosity and care, but express them in different ways.

The next example is from another Kirghiz epic called *Janış-Bayış*. Although the epic was sung by a different singer, when it comes to describe the main hero, he automatically switches to the idea of being generous and elaborates the existing traditional formulaic verse line:

Jetimge kiyer ton berip  
Jetpegenge chong berip,  
Kojo, moldo, eshenge,  
Kol kayirdi köp berip,  
Jesirge soyor koy berip,  
Jeti küni toy berip.<sup>287</sup>

.....

Achka bolsok nan bergen,  
 Kaalap algan ar jerden,  
 Jilangach kelsek ton bergen,  
 Ata bolup asırap,  
 Kerektüünü mol bergen.  
 Jöö kelgende at bergen,  
 Kechiktirbey bat bergen<sup>288</sup>

He gave a coat to an orphan to wear,  
 He gave a lot to those who were left out  
 He gave a lot of alms  
 To *kojos, mullahs, and ishans*,  
 He gave a sheep to the widow to slaughter,  
 And he gave a feast for seven days.

When we were hungry, he gave us bread,  
 He brought us from different places,  
 When we came naked, he gave us coats,  
 He became our father and took care of us  
 And gave everything what we needed  
 When one came on foot, he gave him horses,  
 And he gave them without delay.

Again, the generosity of the hero is illustrated in the traditional formulaic verse lines and very much resembles the above discussed verse lines from the Kültegin Inscriptions and the epic *Er Tabildi*.

Another well-known Kyrgyz epic is *Er Töshtük*, which is also found in the oral literature of many other Turkic peoples considered to be one of the oldest epic songs for

<sup>287</sup> Kurmanbek. *Janış-Bayış*. Frunze: “Kirgizstan”, 1970, p. 167.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232

it contains many supernatural elements. In it, we see a slightly different version of the formulaic verse line. Elaman, the father of the hero Er Töshtük, who is also rich, says the followings:

Segiz şaray kazınam  
Baltalap oozun achtırdım;  
Jetim menen jesirge,  
Cholok, sokur, mayıpka  
Saryp kılıp chachtırdım<sup>289</sup>

I ordered the doors of my eight treasure houses  
 Be opened with axes  
 And distributed the treasure to the orphans and  
 widows, and to the lame, blind and disabled.

Akundarga at berdim,  
Arbın düynö malımdı  
Tilek kılıp bat berdim;  
Dubana menen esenge  
Kuyrugı kuchak at berdim.<sup>290</sup>

I gave horses to the oral poets,  
 I gave my tremendous wealth and cattle  
 immediately saying blessings  
 To the beggars and *ishans*  
 I gave horses with thick tails.

Uulum Töshtük kelgen song,  
Jeti tam ele kazınam,  
Chilgiy tolgon sarı altın,  
Talkalap oozun achayın.  
Kulak ugup köz körgön,  
Jeti uruu kırgız uuluna,  
Zarıp kılıp chachayın.  
Jetim menen jesirge,  
Kolu jetkis bakırğa  
Düynöm chachuuga oy kılıp  
<sup>291</sup>

Upon my son Töshtük's return  
 I will break open  
 My seven treasure (houses)  
 Filled only with yellow gold,  
 I will distribute them  
 To the Kyrgyz children  
 Of seven clans.  
 I want to disperse my wealth  
 To the orphans and widows and  
 The poor who are helpless.

In conclusion, the hero's/khan's virtues are measured by his generosity and deep concern for the poor, namely: orphans, widows, the old, and beggars. In many instances in the epic tradition, this generous deed is carried out upon the hero's return to his people after defeating the enemy. In some cases, for instance in *Manas*, Jakıp bay offers a big

<sup>289</sup> Karalaev, Sayakbay. *Er Töshtük*. Frunze; Menktep, 1969, p. 55.

<sup>290</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 324

feast to his people and also invites the poor in order to receive God's blessing to grant him a child. However, the stable use of the structural feature of the same verse lines in almost all the heroic epics is just the singer's "duty" to conform to the traditional theme and formulaic nature. He has a freedom to contribute to it by extending the usage of parallelisms, but must keep the essence of the original verse line. This traditional theme has been recognized as a specific characteristic of heroic epic language. We see that different singers add semantically similar expressions which alter the original length, yet keep the expressions and motif of giving clothes to those without clothes and making poor people rich and few people many, which serve as the core lines for all the variations in later recorded epic songs. These versions of the above-discussed verse lines are made up of phrases, which prove them to be the product of centuries of practice.

Muslim clergy might argue that the idea of being generous and taking care of the poor and the needy came from Islamic religious values, rather than stemming from the local Central Asian nomadic tradition. It is true that not only Islam, but other major world religions, also, foster these ideas. It does not, however, mean they were non-existent in other cultures that practice different religious beliefs and practices. So, the following accusations or criticisms of traditional feasting among the Central Asians, particularly among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs by the orthodox and purist Muslim clergy, are irrelevant, in my opinion. Below, Abdishükür Narmatov, the former president of the Islamic Institute in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan talks about this lavish or excessive traditional memorial feasts among the Kyrgyz, and explains what kind of deeds are considered a *soop*, a good merit in Islam:

One Kyrgyz *deputat* [parliament member] offered *Quran okuttu* [memorial feast accompanied by a Quranic recitation] and invited 200 people. Just to rent the restaurant cost him eighteen thousand *soms*. What is the purpose of killing an animal? If my father or mother would die... The Prophet said in one of his *hadith*: if a man dies, all the things stop reaching him, except the *soop* of three things. The first is the Quranic recitations of his children who are left behind. The second is doing endless kindness/charity work, e.g., planting a tree, providing water, fixing a road or bridge, helping a school, etc. The third one is leaving some kind of wisdom or intellectual work, which would help people, the state or your townsmen. The dead would definitely benefit from the *soop* of these three deeds of his/her living relatives. That *deputat* could have donated those eighteen thousand *soms* to a school. Why did he have to arrange that feast at a big restaurant and slaughter two mares?! If I would do it for my mother on the path of God, I would spend my money for more necessary things such as helping the orphans and widows. That would be much better. Today, unfortunately, we want to show off our wealth by arranging at restaurants. This is completely against Shari'a as well as against the state's policy of elimination of poverty. Every person must have a purpose in his work.

From the Kyrgyz traditional point of view, however, it is absolutely impossible not to offer the memorial feast for one's father or mother, but give that money to a mosque or religious school, or to build a bridge. Many Kyrgyz support these virtues in Islam, but their social and family obligation as Kyrgyz comes first. This once more proves my main argument that the ethnic or tribal identity of the Kyrgyz overrides their religious identity as Muslim. Any Kyrgyz, who decides to offer a big memorial feast, does so in consultation with his elderly kinsmen, who get together at least two or three weeks before the event and decide about the number of animals to be killed and which special groups of respected guests should be given a *soyush*. Kyrgyz feast, be it a funeral/memorial feast or wedding, involved and still involves large number of invited and uninvited people and thus a large number of animals killed to serve them as food. The following excerpt from

my uncle's interview describes a traditional *ash* he offered for his father who died at the age of 74:

Usually, an old man's (over seventy years old) *ash* is offered after a year, because he is considered to have lived long enough. A younger person's *ash* is usually offered after two, three, four or five years. Offering an *ash* is mandatory in our culture. However, young children were not offered an *ash*.

We offered your *tayata's* [maternal grandfather] *ash* after one and a half years. We killed a four-year-old mare from his own herd. (One may also sacrifice the deceased's own horse). In addition, we killed about fifteen sheep in honor of *qudas* [in-laws], uncles and other honorable guests and relatives. 10-12 people got a sheep, because the sheep has 12 *jiliks*. We cooked 130kg of rice pilaf, which required 100 kg of cottonseed oil. 3-4 sacks of flour to make bread and *boorsok* and plus we bought *navvai nan* [flat and round traditional bread baked in tandoor]. We bought a sack of candies and used 15-20kg of *sari may* [clarified butter]. Also, a lot of gift exchanges took place.

We also organized contests of traditional games. The first one was wrestling for which we gave two sheep and two goats as main prizes. The remaining wrestlers received carpets, rugs, and money. Then, there was a *bayge*, a long distance horse racing involving three groups of horses according to their age. There was *at bayge* [horses four years and older], *kunan bayge* [three year old horses], and *jorgo bayge* [trotter race]. There were forty horses in the *at bayge*, 25 in the *kunan bayge* and ten in the *jorgo bayge*, because *jorgos* are not many. The winner of the *at bayge* received a *tay* [two year-old horse], the winner of the *kunan bayge* received two sheep, and the winner of the *jorgo bayge* was awarded a *tay* as well. Those who came in second, third and fourth received goats, kids and money. There was also *er english* [wrestling on horseback]. All together, I gave away twenty-one prizes.

I paid for all the expenditures, because my father's livestock was left in my hand. His other sons and daughters also contributed. I offered him this splendid memorial feast not because I wanted to show off my wealth, but to make my father content and happy in the other world. He himself loved animals and very much enjoyed traditional games played on horseback, because in his youth, he used to participate in *er english*.

By today's measures, this memorial feast would be considered a lavish one. Only wealthy families who own many livestock can afford such large feasts. My uncle, who inherited his father's livestock, spent a large amount of money and livestock for his



father's *ash*, but the main idea or goal here is not showing off one's wealth, but showing respect to the deceased's spirit and the ideal way of doing it is by sharing one's wealth by feeding and entertaining all the people, who come to the feast. There is no doubt that by hosting hundreds of people and giving away so many animals my uncle gained more social status or reputation among his kinsmen, friends, and villagers. Since he is known as one of the wealthy men in his region, in terms of owning livestock, people expected a big memorial feast from him. If he had not organized those traditional horse games, which are traditionally played at memorial feasts, people would have definitely thought that he was stingy. Besides, horse games are still very much enjoyed by the Kyrgyz, especially in the countryside. It needs to be pointed out, however, that this traditional nomadic Kyrgyz society does not force the poor or expect such big feasts from those who cannot afford them. In such situations, tradition dictates that they still must offer the memorial feast on a small scale or whenever they can afford it. *Namis* [pride, with a positive connotation] is still strong among the Kyrgyz. If for some reason, a man is too poor to give a memorial feast, his kinsmen usually offer him help in order to protect their tribal status and pride.

In Autumn of 2003, before we returned to the United States upon completing my fieldwork in Kizil-Jar, my husband offered the *ash* for his father. His father, my father-in-law had died in 1991 from a lung cancer at the age of 48. He left behind his wife with four sons and two daughters, who struggled financially after their father died and the sons were not able to offer his *ash* sooner. Now, after twelve years, my husband wanted to carry out his duty before his father because now he could afford it. Since he came from the United States, his kinsmen and people in the village also expected it from him. When

we counted all the expenditures of the ash including the mare and the twenty-five sheep allotted for *soyush*, it cost my husband about \$1600 US dollars, which is a lot of money. The religious clergy is mistaken when they say that is a big economic harm to families. They do not see the benefit of it, however. The host does not lose anything basically. After the *ash* was over, when counted all the *koshumchas*, contributions of our *uruk-tuugan*, kinsmen and *qudas*, in-laws of my father-in-law listed in our *depter*, “record book,” almost all that money that we had spent was returned in livestock and in money.

In conclusion, the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs took and still take their tradition of offering *ash* very seriously. By giving examples from Kyrgyz heroic epics, I have tried to show that feasts, particularly funerals and memorial feasts among the nomadic Kyrgyz, were the major events where members of different tribes socialized and entertained themselves. Therefore, one should not underestimate their significance in the Central Asian nomadic society that historically and traditionally highly values generosity and justice of their wealthy, including the tribal leaders and khans. And one of the ways to show one’s generosity on a grand level was through offering such big feasts, at which people, including the poor and the needy, are well fed and entertained through traditional horse games.

The tradition of offering *ash* is also supported on a national level. Recently, with the initiative of the “Asaba” (Banner) Renaissance Party, a special committee was organized under the Kyrgyz government. An expedition consisting of Kyrgyz Parliament members, writers and intellectuals, and “Ashar” Builders Union was sent to the Bedel Ashuu (Bedel Pass, 4300 meters) in the Boom Kapchigay (Boom Gorge) in northwestern Kyrgyzstan bordering with China. The goal was to collect the bone remains of those

Kyrgyz men, women, and children who perished during the 1916 uprising while trying to escape to China from the Russian Tsar's army. The bones of humans and animals such as ox and horses were scattered all over the pass stretching for about 5 kilometers.<sup>292</sup> The expedition, which consisted of men only, separated the human bones from those of animals, which also died during that time. In 1916 the Kyrgyz rebelled against the Tsarist colonial policy to mobilize all Central Asian, including the Kyrgyz, men from the age of 18-40 to the war.<sup>293</sup> The uprising, which involved the whole region of Central Asia, is remembered as one of the most tragic events in recent the history of Kyrgyz people. It is said among all other Central Asians, the northern Kyrgyz suffered the most from the brutal oppression of Russian soldiers, who severely punished the people, including young children and infants. Tens of thousands of people perished while passing through the high passes covered with snow and ice due to cold, hunger and illness. The Kyrgyz consider this event as a genocide attempt by the Tsarist government. According to historical Russian and local sources, approximately 150.000 Kyrgyz died during the 1916 uprising.<sup>294</sup> This tragic event was a taboo topic in the history of Kyrgyz during the Soviet period. It was not taught in schools. Even after 90 years the Kyrgyz strongly felt that it was their duty as Kyrgyz and Muslims to give a proper burial to the victims of the uprising. According to Muslim tradition, they buried the bones by wrapping them in white shroud. The burial site was at the border post between China and Kyrgyzstan. Right after finishing the burial part, which took two days, on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, according to Kyrgyz tradition, an *ash*, memorial feast was offered in the Barskoon village in honor of

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<sup>292</sup> RFERL, August 1, 2006

<sup>293</sup> *Ürkün 1916: tarikhiy-darektüü ocherkrter*. Edited Kengesh Jusupov, Bishkek: Ala-Too jurnaliniñ bash redaktsiyası, 1993.

<sup>294</sup> Kubat Chekirov, August 1, 2006

those perished. People in the Barksoon village prepared for the *ash* by erecting yurts and killing horses and sheep.<sup>295</sup> According to funeral etiquette, when the men, who participated in the expedition, returned from burying the dead, they approached those yurts by crying out loud. This way the male family members communicate to those mourning female family members.

Despite the current difficult financial and economic conditions, the traditions of offering *ash* requires killing of a horse (which costs between \$500-700 USD) and several sheep. Without an *ash*, the Kyrgyz funeral rite is considered incomplete and *ash*, as the final memorial feast, brings a closure both to the deceased's spirit and to the mourning family who is left behind. Ideally *ash* should be offered after a year, but people can offer it when their financial and economic situations allow them. As we learned from the recent *ash* offered for victims of the 1916 uprising, *ash* must be offered even after 90 years have past.

### *Söök koyuu*, Burial

Burial customs appear in different forms in different cultures. In some cultures, like Hindu, people burn the deceased body, and but many cultures around the world including Islamic, bury their dead under the ground.

The main terms and expressions associated with a Kyrgyz burial give us some idea about the ancient burial practices of nomadic Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz say: "Sööktü koyuu," "Burying the bones (not the body)" and "söökkö tüşhüü," "falling into the bones (washing the body)." Archeological diggings of ancient burial sites show that the Turks

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<sup>295</sup> RFERL, July, 27, 2006

scrapped the flesh off the deceased's body and only buried the bones. We find the remnants of this ancient practice in the Kyrgyz epic *Manas* where we find the following lines: "kīmiz menen juudurup, kīlich menen kirdirip," i.e., "she [his wife Kanikey] had his body washed with *koumiss* and had his flesh scrapped off the bones." When the hero *Manas* dies, his wise wife *Kanikey* buries his bones secretly. The epic gives a very detailed and interesting account of the hero's burial, which is organized by his wife. Another assumption is that in the past, many soldiers were killed in the battlefields of foreign lands and therefore, it was difficult to carry the bodies for long distances. In order that the bodies would not get smelly or rotten, they separated their bones from the flesh. In the past, when Kyrgyz lived in high mountains, when a person died in wintertime, they could not bury him/her under the ground because the ground would be frozen. They wrapped the body in a felt and hung it in between the tree branches. The body stayed there until spring and was buried when the ground was soft enough to dig.

Since the adoption of Islam, most of the burial customs in Central Asia have become Islamized. Today when it comes to following Islamic rules, the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs strictly obey the burial procedures dictated by Quran.

In "The Memorial Feast for Kōkötōy Khan," one of the main episodes of the epic *Manas*, as part of his *kereez*, testament, the Khan tells his advisor exactly how he should be buried:

<p>Astima altın tak kilip, Ak ĩstampilga orotup, Asemdep ölük jatkirip, Akiret ketken men üçün Arbin düynö zarp kilip, Kilich menen kirdirip, Kimiz menen juudurup,</p>	<p>Place a golden throne [wooden plate] under me Have my body wrapped in white muslin, Treat my dead body with dignity, For me, who has left for the other world, Spend much wealth, Have my flesh scraped off with a sword And washed it with koumiss,</p>
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<p>Ayak menen bashimdi          Kimkap menen buudurup,          Say törögö karmatip,          Sarbap menen buudurup,          Zamzam menen juudurp,          Charaynaga chaptatip,          Shayingige kaptatip,          İrchilarga maktatip,          İjiktarga saktatip . . . <sup>297</sup></p>	<p>Have my legs and head          Tied with a <i>kimkap</i> silk,          Have my body be held only by nobles,          And wrapped with a <i>sarbap</i> silk,          Washed with <i>Zamzam</i><sup>296</sup> water          Dressed with armor          Placed on a camel          Have me praised by singers          And guarded by <i>İjiks</i> . . .</p>
<p>Aalamdın baarip jydırıp,          Shariyatka sıydırıp,          Kette, kichik iygarıp,          . . . .          Eki jüz ming koy aydap,          Tokson ming kara mal baylap,          Burak atın tokutup,</p>	<p>He gathered the entire world          And did according to Shari'a,          He offered food to old and young,            He killed two hundred thousand sheep,          And ninety thousand cows,          He had his [father'] horse saddled and          harnessed with all the decorations,          And <i>janaza</i><sup>298</sup> read for his father,          They carried his body on a <i>tabit</i>,<sup>299</sup>          And held his <i>bidiya</i>,</p>
<p>Janazasın okutup,          Tabitka salıp kötörüp,          Bidiyasın ötkörüp,          Salootu namaz-janaza          Sap-sap bolup janasha,          Karagan menen köz jetpeyt,          Kıykırıp aytsa söz jetpeyt,</p>	<p>For the <i>janaza</i> prayer          People lined up in rows,          One couldn't see the end of the line,          One's words couldn't reach even if one          shouts,          Upon finishing the prayer          And saying about his glory          Upon finishing their prayer without          touching the ground with their head          They saddled and fully harnessed his horse          Named Chongtoru          The wealthy ancestor Kökötöy          Was buried in that way,          The dirt which people put into his grave          while praying          Became like a mountain.</p>
<p>Okup namaz bolushup,          Tekbirin aytip koyushup,          Sejidesiz namaz okushup,</p>	<p>Upon finishing the prayer          And saying about his glory          Upon finishing their prayer without          touching the ground with their head          They saddled and fully harnessed his horse          Named Chongtoru          The wealthy ancestor Kökötöy          Was buried in that way,          The dirt which people put into his grave          while praying          Became like a mountain.</p>
<p>Chongtoru degen külügün          Burak atka tokushup,          Bay Kökötöy babangdın          Koyulganı sho boldu,          Dubalap salgan topurak</p>	<p>They saddled and fully harnessed his horse          Named Chongtoru          The wealthy ancestor Kökötöy          Was buried in that way,          The dirt which people put into his grave          while praying          Became like a mountain.</p>
<p>Bir döbödöy too boldu.<sup>300</sup></p>	<p>Became like a mountain.</p>

<sup>296</sup> *Zamzam* is the well near the Ka'bah, Mecca. The water is considered to have special spiritual powers. Newby D. Gordon. *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2002, p. 216.

<sup>297</sup> *Manas*. Version by Sagınbay Orozbekov, p. 11.

<sup>298</sup> *Janaza* is a funerary prayer for the deceased and it is recited after the body is washed and ready to be buried.

<sup>299</sup> *Tabit* is a flat wooden board on which the deceased's body is carried to the burial ground.

<sup>300</sup> *Manas*. Version by Sagınbay Orozbekov, p. 47.

These verse lines show a strong presence of Islamic burial customs. All these terms are loan words from Arabic. Since it was not an ordinary burial, but a burial of a Khan, the epic singer gives a very elaborate description. One needs to keep in mind that the epic was recorded from singers who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Islamic influence was strong. If the singer has a good knowledge of Islamic burial, he demonstrated it in his song.

Most Kyrgyz are familiar with this religious terminology of the burial tradition. And all Central Asian Muslims follow Islamic burial procedures such as washing the deceased's body and wrapping in a white shroud, reciting *janaza*, prayer before the body is taken out of the house. In sedentary societies such as Uzbeks and Tajiks, each *mahalla* or village has a mosque and gravediggers whom people can hire. The deceased's body is usually taken to the mosque for washing, wrapping and reciting the *janaza*. The nomadic Kyrgyz did not have mosques in the mountains and specialists such as washers and gravediggers. Therefore, until today, mostly distant male relatives dig the grave. The body of the deceased is kept, washed and wrapped in one side the yurt behind a special curtain. In Islam, "the closest relatives of the deceased have the primary right to bathe the deceased."<sup>301</sup> If the deceased is male, only close male relatives and friends will wash the body, if the deceased is female, female relatives will have the honor to wash. Often, some people leave a *kereez*, testament about who should be given the honor to wash his/her body. Kyrgyz still follow their tribal identity strictly when it comes to burial customs. If a wife dies, only female relatives from her own family side or tribe wash the body, because her bones belong to her own kinsmen. A married woman always has the support

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<sup>301</sup> Dr. Muhamad Abdul Hai 'Arifi. *The Islamic Way in Death*. Translated by Ahkame-e-Mayyit. Karachi-74550, Pakistan: Idaratul-Qur'an Press, 2001, p. 40.

of her *törkün*, kinsmen, even when they die. In Islam washing the body is considered a sacred task. It is said “the Holy Prophet has said that the person who bathes the body of the deceased is as cleansed of sins as a new-born child; and the person who dresses the deceased in a shroud will be dressed with the apparel of Paradise by Allah Almighty.”<sup>302</sup> Quran dictates: “When one of your men dies, do not keep him in the house for long. Make haste in taking him to the grave and in burying him”<sup>303</sup> In other words, “all funeral arrangements should be swift . . . it is not appropriate that the dead body of a Muslim should be left to stay amidst his family members for long.”<sup>304</sup> Kyrgyz Muslim scholar Chotonov gives the following reason for the necessity of a swift burial in Muslim culture:

The first thing is the *meyit*, the deceased. He has the right to be buried as soon as possible. His body must be washed before it gets cold. He must be washed, wrapped in a shroud, read *janaza* and buried. Because his new home will be the grave where he will be questioned. His tongue should not be frozen during the questioning. It is very bad if the deceased’s body gets stinky because *janaza* should not be read to him, for *janaza* has its own special rules and condition.”<sup>305</sup>

The *janaza* prayer must be recited for every Muslim before the burial. And the Kyrgyz do follow this important condition of Quran. An imam or *mullah* leads *janaza* according to the practice of Prophet Muhammad: “The body of the deceased is placed in front of the Imam who leads the prayer. The Imam stands in line with the chest of the deceased. Everyone in the congregation makes the following intention: (niyyah:) “I intend to offer the salah of janazah in devotion to Allah Almighty and in prayer for the deceased.”<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 40

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 34

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>305</sup> Chotonov, pp. 232-233.

<sup>306</sup> Dr. Muhamad Abdul Hai ‘Arifi, p. 72.



When it comes to the Islamic burial arrangements, the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz never accepted the rule that the dead must be buried as soon as possible usually within twenty-four hours. When I asked my grandmother what she thought of this issue of burying the dead as soon as possible and thus not killing any animal, she strongly objected it by saying: “It is our custom from the past. How can you bury the dead without killing an animal?! It will be equal to the burial of a dog’s carcass! When I die, I want to be buried like a human being, not like a dog!” My great uncle Anarbay also expressed strong sentiments about it:

I learned that keeping the body for one or two days does not do any harm. The Uzbeks say that it is a bad sign for the dead body to stay overnight i.e., the outcome will be bad. The Uzbeks bury their dead even by a lantern, they do not let it stay overnight. As for us, we keep it up to three days. We think that after living this long in this house, he/she cannot fit in it for three or four days?! If there are close relatives coming from far away, we wait for them. Because it is important to see one’s parent, brother or sister, wife or husband before burial for the last time. Even if he/she is dead, they will have the chance to see his/her face. If you just bury him without any rituals, he will go away just like that. However, our father raised three of us, including his many grandchildren. Since he has done a lot of service to us, we must return that service. We tried our best to help and respect him he was alive, but we must send him to the other world with the same dignity and respect. It is not good to bury him immediately right after his death as if you are happy to get rid of him. This is our Kyrgyz custom, but there are some cases when people bury the dead immediately.

Here my uncle noted the following about the Uzbek burial custom:

Among the Uzbeks, however, there is only one body washer. Usually, there is one body washer in each village. They even have special gravediggers who prepare the graves. You just need to inform them about a death and they will prepare everything. Among us, the Kyrgyz, we give nice coats for those who wash the body. We call this tradition *söökkö tüshüü*, i.e., washing the bones. This tradition exists only among the Kyrgyz. Even when an old woman dies, her best respected friend or

relative washes her body and receives nice clothes which had been prepared by the deceased before her death.

### Kyrgyz Cemeteries and Funerary Monuments.

Islam forbids any marking on a Muslim grave and all Muslims should follow the practice of Prophet Muhammad, who is said to have never raised a grave high by building tombs with bricks, stones or other materials. In Islam “ . . . all the structures such as dome or cupola over the grave are “bidd’ah”, recent religious innovations, and thus reprehensible (makrooh).”<sup>307</sup>

The Kyrgyz usually chose an elevated area such as a hilltop or a pass to bury their dead. Unlike in Islam, Kyrgyz mark their grave with all kinds of structures as a sign of respect for the dead. As Privratsky notes correctly about the religious landscape of Central Asia: “Mosques and minarets dominate the skylines of the great cities of the Muslim world, but on the vast stretches of hinterland where there are no skylines, the shrines of Muslim saints and the graves of ancestors are the most accurate markers of the Muslim identity of the people.”<sup>308</sup> When traveling through the Kyrgyz territory one sees gravesites of various shapes and structures which have mixed Islamic, pre-Islamic and Soviet/Russian elements. It is common to put a metal frame of a yurt [very un-Islamic] with Moon and Star on top, which is an Islamic symbol. Many graves are built in the style of a Sufi saint’s tomb with the name and birth and death dates of the person. Most graves tell us about the person buried there. For example, during my travel in northern regions of Narin and Issik-Kol in Kyrgyzstan I saw one very interesting grave, which had

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>308</sup> Privratsky, p. 50-51

a drawing of a hunting scene because the person buried there had been a hunter in his life. The Muslim clergy in Kyrgyzstan is also trying to ban these un-Islamic practices.

## Conclusion

This chapter dealt with Kyrgyz traditional funerary rites and customs, which are being condemned as *bidd'a*, religious innovations by orthodox and purist Muslim clergy. I discussed and analyzed in detail those key aspects of traditional funeral without which the rite of passage for both the deceased and the relatives would not be complete. There is deep wisdom and meaning that lay behind these old and complex funeral customs and practices which the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs developed, adapted, modified, and refined throughout the past centuries.

Unlike in Islamic/Muslim funeral, which puts an exclusive focus on the deceased and his/her peaceful transition from this world to the other, the Kyrgyz, like many other indigenous cultures, foster different set of rituals and values both for the dead and the mourners. In other words, in Kyrgyz traditional society, a funeral is not just about the dead, but also about the status of the living, those who are left behind. As Danforth notes correctly, funeral rites is “the system of death related practices which overcomes the threat of social paralysis. Death rites are concrete procedures for the maintenance of reality in the face of death. Through the performance of these rituals, those who have confronted death are able to resume their reality-sustaining conversation.”<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Danforth, M. Loring. *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 31.

The formerly nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakh took and still take their funerals and memorial feasts, particularly the *ash* (Kyrgyz), *as* (Kazakh) very seriously for they do not just involve burying the dead but many other social duties and responsibilities that reinforce the relationship between kinsmen, clans, and tribal groups. Funerals and memorial feasts in traditional Kyrgyz and Kazakh tribal society continue to draw quite a large number of people who come from near and far places. Accommodation of these guests with food and housing for one or two days falls upon the family and tribesmen and neighbors of the deceased person. Every Kyrgyz family keeps a "record book" in which they register each guest who brings "koshumcha," contribution which is usually given in livestock such as a sheep, goat, or horse. Nowadays, most people bring money. One trustworthy man will be assigned to register all the guests' names and the amount of their contribution. Then, according to that list, the host must give a *soyush*, one sheep to be killed and served in honor of those guests, who will be assigned to the neighboring houses. At memorial feasts, thirty houses will divide the guests among themselves. Each house will get one sheep and twelve people, because the sheep has only twelve *jiliks*, parts to serve. The house of the deceased usually hosts the *quda-sööks* in-laws, and very close friends who come from far away. This is one of the best aspects of Kyrgyz culture, because the burden does not fall onto one family. In other words, as Ibrayev notes "it is a social necessity evolving from real life experience and outside of human free will."

## CHAPTER VI:

Kyrgyz National Ideology: *Tengirchilik*

## Introduction

In the year 1992, one year after the Soviet collapse, I became a first-year student at one of the higher institutions of learning in my newly independent country's capital city, Bishkek. And I remember very well when my female teacher, who taught us a course on World Cultures, told us to go to the Philharmonic Concert Hall and stand next to the big statue of the hero Manas and the monuments of the *manaschiis*, singers of the epic *Manas*, and write an essay on the question *Men kimmin? Who Am I?* All of us got into a trolleybus with pens and notebooks in our hands. After getting off at the bus stop in front of the Concert Hall, we walked up to the statues of Manas, his wife Kanıkey, and his advisor, the wise man Bakay. At that time, as young seventeen year-old students, we did not quite understand the objective of this task. We had never been asked that question before, and we did not know what to write in our essays. Our teacher had not given us any guidance or suggestions on the topic. We were told to look at these statutes and the Ala-Too Mountains, which can be seen from a distance at that place. We learned later that our teacher wanted us to get inspiration from our national epic *Manas* and from the snow-capped mountains. After I came to study in the United States in 1994, I realized that our teacher wanted us to know who we were in terms of our national identity. The word "identity" does not exist in the Kyrgyz/Turkic language, so our teacher expressed that idea in the form of the question, *Men kimmin? Who Am I?* We were confused and we did not know exactly what the purpose of this interesting task was. So we could not write our essay, and left the place after wandering aimlessly for half an hour around the tall

statues. I realized later, we were part of the bigger process of national awakening or identity formation that was taking place in all of the newly independent nation states at that time.

However, as Islamic fundamentalism is taking hold among some segments of the population, an alternative to a Kyrgyz national ideology is being promoted by local intellectuals and the Kyrgyz government. Many Kyrgyz intellectuals, who are knowledgeable about Kyrgyz oral tradition and nomadic culture, do not approve of the validity or suitability of Islam or the western form of democracy for Kyrgyz culture, but search for a national ideology which is already engrained in Kyrgyz culture. They believe that foreign or imported ideology or religious creed will destroy native worldview and traditional values. In the opinion of many Kyrgyz scholars and intellectuals, a national ideology is absolutely necessary for the country's socio-cultural, political, and economic development. It is argued that Kyrgyz should first of all know their religious and cultural history in order to establish their identity. Knowing their past will help people to develop a sense of pride about who they are and respect for their nomadic heritage. Ömüräliev, a Kyrgyz writer and journalist, quotes the Greek philosopher Socrates: "Open your eyes, first know who you are"<sup>310</sup> and further elaborates by saying: "One who does not know who he/she is, cannot understand his/her surroundings. If an individual is faced with such an important question, what can one say about the whole nation?"<sup>311</sup> A Kazakh scholar

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>311</sup> Op.cit.

and thinker, Akseleu Seydimbek notes: “It is bad if others don’t understand you (and your culture), but it is a tragedy if you don’t understand yourself.”<sup>312</sup>

As in many post-colonial nation states, after the collapse of the Soviet union, Kyrgyz historians and writers began the project of rewriting history, by searching for historical facts and unique socio-cultural values and traditions which would legitimize the Kyrgyz people’s existence as an ancient as well as a modern independent state. Askar Akaev, the first president of the independent Kyrgyz republic, headed the country from 1991-2005. During his presidency, Akaev promoted the national ideology under the slogan “Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home,” taking into consideration the diverse ethnic composition of the country. He used the epic *Manas* as the basis for a national ideology by extracting seven testaments *Manastin jeti osuyati* from *Manas* for Kyrgyzstan’s citizenship. Akayev’s ideology seemed to work only on the official level. Shortly before his overthrow in March 2005, Akayev published a book titled *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epic Manas*.<sup>1</sup> But, due to its price and limited print run, it failed to reach a wide audience. No one read the book besides a handful of historians and politicians.

The world of the epic *Manas* is very rich. Since the adoption of Islam, singers incorporated many Islamic beliefs and practices into the existing native religious worldview. And that ancient worldview is not only found in oral tradition only, but in the everyday life relationships of Kyrgyz people. While one group of intellectuals, local Muslim clergy, young and middle aged Kyrgyz men, who went to study in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, propose the religion of Islam as an answer for personal and economic prosperity (see Chapter 4), the secular minded intellectuals, who also consider themselves

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<sup>312</sup> Seydimbek, Akseleu. *Mir Kazakhov. Etnokul’turnoe pereosmyslenie* (The World of the Kazakhs. Ethnocultural Rethinking). Almaty: RAUAN, 2001, p. 13.

Muslim, search for their ancient roots, for something that offers more than a religious “dogma.”

Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals believe that it is their centuries of nomadic life and culture which preserved the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz and their identities for thousands of years, and it is that cultural heritage, not the nomadic lifestyle itself, which will save them in the future. It is argued that most of the traditional customs and spiritual values stemming from their nomadic worldview continue to play an important role in cotemporary Kyrgyz/Kazakh lives. They called that ancient worldview *Tengirchilik* (“Tengrianstvo” in Russian) and it is considered to be the native worldview of all the Altaic peoples of Central Asia. *Tengirchilik* has not lost its relevance even today, they argue, therefore has to be raised to a national level and announced officially as a national ideology.

### National Ideology and Native Intellectuals

The emergence of national ideology usually takes place during major historical and political times of transformation. *Tengirchilik* is an example of the kinds of national ideology that is emerging in the post-Soviet, post-Cold War world.

Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbaum have written theoretical works on the concept of nation and nationalism. Among these well-known western scholars, Anthony D. Smith’s presents a relevant theory to the growth of nationalism. He suggests that “first nations” in a given region emerged around a centralized state, which contained an easily identifiable dominant “ethnie.” The minor “ethnies had to conform to the dominant ‘ethnie’ that had a name, a myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive



culture, a homeland and a sense of solidarity. In case the “ethnie” did not possess these characteristics, it had to “rediscover” and articulate them in order to legitimize the existence of a nation.

National elites and intellectuals of all backgrounds have always played a key role in nation building processes in many countries, as, e.g. Mongolia, Eastern Europe and the minority regions of China. The formation of Eastern European countries as nation states after WWI and WWII serves as one of the best examples. Scholars like Katherine Verdery characterize the local intellectuals’ view of national identity as “collectivist,” imagining the existence of a unified or homogeneous group of peoples or ethnic groups in each country.<sup>313</sup> Polish intellectuals played a key role in creating Polish national culture by reviving nationalist sentiments and feelings about Poland’s language and tragic history. “Culture” served as the medium of Polish national awakening and the feeling of belonging to a common homeland.<sup>314</sup> In a similar way, in 1918 the Czechs, who are now independent from Soviet domination, searched for their “origins” as a way to show their distinctiveness or “originality” from others.<sup>315</sup> The case of Hungary did not differ much from the rest of the region. Folk culture and the nomadic background served as the main source for Hungarian national ideology, identity and symbols. Romanian politicians and intellectuals believed in the existence of the Romanian nation as a “collective individual” and tried to institutionalize national ideology.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> *National Character and National Ideology in Interwar Eastern Europe*. Edited by Katherine Verdery and Ivo Banac, New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1995.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

In analyzing the role and motivations of intellectuals in general, Verdery makes a good point. She does not view the people's, mainly intellectuals' choice of certain values and preferences, and the standards of their scholarly work, as a political will to gain power.<sup>317</sup> She believes that these genuine attachments of intellectuals to their people's traditional values are created "in opposition to specific others, because values and preferences, and standards are multiple. And because of this diversity in values and standards, their genuine goal will be forced to compete with other standards. Their concerns and activities may look like a political struggle, but at the same time, they bring "alternative" values into the "competitive relation."<sup>318</sup>

Some Russian/Soviet scholars such as Valerii Tishkov, director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, have been very critical of the nation building process, which took place in the non-Russian successor states after the Soviet collapse. Tishkov is the editor of the recent book *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict In and After the Soviet Union*.<sup>319</sup> In his own article, he argues that the Soviet discipline of studying ethnicity or national identity was trapped between politics and the theory of primordialism, which sees ethnicity as an objective "given."<sup>320</sup> He identifies two approaches in the study of ethnicity. He asserts that non-Russian national intellectuals and elites use ethnicity to gain social acclaim and political power in their societies. He characterizes this approach as "instrumentalist." He calls the second approach "constructivist," where ethnicity is chosen by an individual or a group to satisfy

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>318</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>319</sup> Tishkov, Valery. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict In and After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*. London, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

their personal socio-cultural needs and to achieve certain goals.<sup>321</sup> In this case, the intellectuals do not necessarily play a “manipulative role” in the process of their identity formation. Tishkov is very critical of those non-Russian intellectuals and scholars who, instead of writing “solid and academic” monographs, concern themselves with political activities by circulating pamphlets and brochures.<sup>322</sup> He, however, tends to see these developments from his Russian/Soviet point of view. He does not seem to understand that it is quite natural for the local intellectuals of smaller nations within and outside of Russia, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to genuinely feel obligated to promote and preserve their native language and traditional culture.

Such processes are not unique to Central Asian intellectuals. In the early 1980s, very similar approach to national identity was developed among the intellectuals of minority peoples of China such as the Yi. During these years, a new generation of Yi scholars began rewriting their history in “revisionist terms” as a way of protesting against the old forms of scholarship, influenced by Han-centrism.<sup>323</sup> Pride in Yi culture, language, and ethnic identity flourished during the “economic and policy reforms” that took place in China in the 1980s. Yi scholars claim that everything, which has been believed to be Chinese, such as the “calendar, writing, Daoism, and the yin-yang cosmology” in fact belongs to the Yi.<sup>324</sup> As Harrell and Li state correctly, it is more important to understand why they do what they do rather than trying to verify the validity of their writing. During the Soviet period, like the Yi scholars in China, non-Russian

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>323</sup> Harrell, Stevan and Yongxiang, Li, “The History of the History of the Yi,” Part II. In: *Modern China*, Vol. 29, No. 3, July 2003, pp. 362-396.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., p. 381.

scholars could not write about their history and culture independently. Everything had to be written in the “Marxist-Leninist paradigm” and go through state censorship before being published.

Expression of their national and ethnic identities and pride in their own native cultures was very limited among the non-Russian and non-Han peoples of both multinational empires. Almaz Han, who studied Mongol nationality issues, notes that the intellectuals or elites of various minority groups, including the Inner Mongols, themselves actively participate in the official process of *minzification*, from *minzu*, minority group.<sup>325</sup> He applies the theory of “subalternity” which suggests the idea that the national elites mediate between their own people, the “oppressed,” and the state “oppressor.” The longing of the Inner Mongols for the “ideal or imagined homeland,” Outer Mongolia, is interpreted as a diaspora relationship, which according to the author, can be both real and imagined. Strong nationalist sentiments usually arise when the minority groups’ existence is threatened by the titular nation-state. In the case of Inner Mongolia, the persecution of the members of the New Inner Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party was a wakeup call to the Inner Mongols. That generation, to which Almaz Han himself belongs, played a key role in the revival of ethnic movements during the 1980’s. They spread “nationalist” ideas about Mongol culture and language. Even those Mongols who were basically no different from Chinese farmers and had no knowledge of Mongolian, started to run Mongol language schools. More and more Mongols began to appreciate their traditional dress and wore it as a marker of their national identity. The traditional diet of lamb and dairy foods as well as their material

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<sup>325</sup> Han, Almaz, X., pp. 20-31.

culture such as clothing, horse, and yurt and most importantly, Chingiz Khan, became the symbol of their national identity and unity.<sup>326</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and “the collapse of the central state legitimacy after 1989” in China gave local intellectuals and scholars freedom to express their pride and respect for their culture and identity.<sup>327</sup> It is difficult to expect “solid academic” writings free of any nationalistic sentiments from intellectuals of the post-colonial period. It will take time for the old psychological wounds of colonial experience to heal. This kind of nationalistic approach to identity among the smaller nations or minority groups did not and does not grow in isolation. According to some scholars of Central Asia such as Ilse Cirtautas, “it is an act of survival, revival and self-defense.”<sup>328</sup>

The Central Asian intellectuals also use a “collectivist” approach when speaking of their people’s national identities. However, it is easy to underestimate or dismiss their ideas as being irrelevant or false. Yes, some intellectuals may not have a scholarly basis for their assertions, their theories and their methodologies may not conform to the standards of world/western scholarship. We, the scholars with academic training need to give a space for “semi-scholars” like writers and intellectuals for they bring forth alternative approaches, valuable thoughts and new ideas from which we can learn. Besides, these intellectuals, writers in particular have more influence in Central Asia than scholars, who tend to use a specialized scholarly language and detailed analysis that are not easily comprehended by ordinary people.

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-98.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>328</sup> Written comments of Prof. Ilse Cirtautas, University of Washington, January, 2007.

Therefore, it is more appropriate to treat the writings of such “semi-scholars” not as academic scholarship to be criticized and evaluated, but as phenomena to be explained. In the rest of this chapter, I will first discuss some of the main ideas of *Tengirchilik* explained by Choyun Ömüraliev, who, in 1994, published a very interesting book titled *Tengirchilik*. Then I will present the texts of my oral interviews that I conducted with Choyun Ömüraliev and Dastan Sarıgulov about Kyrgyz national identity, nomadic heritage, and the idea of *Tengirchilik* as they were recorded. The main point here is what they think and how they use *Tengirchilik*, not whether it is accurate. In other words, it does not matter how we, the scholars and readers in general, understand Kyrgyz nomadic heritage and *Tengirchilik*, but rather how Kyrgyz intellectuals like Dastan Sarıgulov portray and interpret these concepts and how Choyun Ömüraliev understands Daoism and how he uses it in building his *Tengirchilik* philosophy. My task would be to provide commentary about some interesting concepts and values in Kyrgyz nomadic culture that require additional explanation or background context.

### The Ancient Turkic Worldview of *Tengirchilik* (Tengrianity)

In November of 2003, during a stay in Bishkek, I was invited to attend the first international scholarly conference on *Tengirchilik*, which was organized by the “Tengir-Ordo Foundation for the Preservation and Development of [the Kyrgyz] National Heritage,” founded by Dastan Sarıgulov. Before this conference took place, I had already read all of Dastan Sarıgulov's small booklets and articles on *Tengirchilik* and Kyrgyz/Central Asia nomadic culture. So, *Tengirchilik* was not a new idea to me, for I

myself had been very much interested in learning about the pre-Islamic religious history of the Central Asian nomadic Turks, including the Kyrgyz.

The participants in the conference were mostly Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals, historians, scholars, poets, and journalists. It was not a public conference, but rather an opportunity for intellectuals to share their thoughts and ideas about *Tengirchilik*. There were two scholars, Turkologists, from abroad: Takashi Osawa from Japan, and Wolfgang Scharlipp from Germany. I translated the German scholar's presentation from English into Kyrgyz. The working languages at this two-day conference were Kyrgyz, English, and Russian. Dastan Sarigulov opened the conference with his paper titled "Tengrianity and the Global Problems of Modernity." The other papers presented at the conference addressed the following issues relating to *Tengirchilik*: "The Metaphysics of Tengrianity," "Tengrianity: Religion or Philosophy," "Aspects of the Cult and Culture of Tengri According to the Ancient Turkic Inscriptions of the Yenisei Basin," "Essentials of Tengriantstvo and the Spectrum of its Spread;" "Tengriantstvo (Tengrianity)—Mirror of the Nomadic World;" "Origins of Tengrianity;" and "Islam and Tengrianity."<sup>329</sup>

One of the main arguments of the presenters was that the Inner Asian religious system of beliefs should not be characterized as "shamanism" which only shows one side of a larger picture. In their opinion, "shamanism," which has become a well-established term in world scholarship, is misleading when used to describe the nature of the religious worldview of the Turkic peoples. They asserted that their ancient worldview should be called *Tengirchilik* (from the ancient Turkic word: *tängri*, which means both "Sky" and

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<sup>329</sup> "Tengrianity is the Worldview of the Altaic People," (Collections of Papers in Russian and English Languages), The First International Scientific (Scholarly) Conference. Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, November 10-13, 2003. Bishkek: "Tengir Ordo" Foundation, 2003.

“God”). It is said that *Tengirchilik* is rather a broad philosophical concept, which goes beyond “shamanic” beliefs and practices. It is argued that the worldview of *Tengirchilik* offers more valuable and sophisticated ideas about life, nature, and human relationships than orthodox Islam or Christianity.

In 1994 Choyun Ömüraliev published an exceptional book titled *Tengirchilik* (Tengrianity, 288 pages). Written in an artistic style, the book contains substantial and important material about *Tengirchilik*. I personally find the book extremely interesting and enlightening in terms of the new materials, sources, and approaches provided by the author. If translated into western languages and particularly into Chinese, the book would definitely be a valuable contribution to Daoist scholarship and thus create interesting discussions among the scholars of Daoism.

Ömüraliev begins his book by searching for a “philosophy” or “idea” which would “preserve the essence and the unique face of the [Kyrgyz] nation.”<sup>330</sup> The author finds that philosophy which he describes as “the longest, greatest and most arduous endless WAY (JOL)?”<sup>331</sup> This WAY, which he calls *Tengirchilik*, is a three-dimensional system of relationships between Kök (Sky), Jer (Earth), and Kishi (Man), who stands between first the two.<sup>332</sup> Therefore, the term “shamanism” is incomplete, for the shaman, who is also a Man, constitutes only one part of the three-dimensional relationship.<sup>333</sup> This ancient *düynötaanım*, worldview of *Tengirchilik*, instead of surviving as a separate religious dogma, has deeply integrated into the everyday life of the Kyrgyz (and Kazakhs), who, until today, very much value many of its ideas and apply them into their

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<sup>330</sup> Ömüraliev, Choyun. *Tengirchilik* (Tengrianity). Bishkek: “KRON” Firm, 1994, p. 9.

<sup>331</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., p. 28.



personal, spiritual, and social lives. According to Ömüraliev, this ancient worldview of the ancestors of the nomadic Kyrgyz has a “universal appeal,” “for it is not a philosophy of the past, but has the potential to solve modern and future [global] problems.”<sup>334</sup> All the “modern slogans of democracy such as ‘Human Rights Stand Above All’ are not enough” and they are just “empty declarations” states the author.<sup>335</sup> In his view, *Tengirchilik* “is necessary [for the Kyrgyz] to find their own place in the world community.”<sup>336</sup>

The author connects the ancient Dao philosophy with the ancient Turkic worldview of *Tengirchilik*. The link between the two should not come as a surprise because for thousands of years the nomadic Turks and Chinese closely interacted with each other. One should give a lot of credit to the author for his rich knowledge of Kyrgyz oral literature and nomadic culture, which he experienced while growing up in the mountains.

First of all, as many other Central Asian advocates of *Tengirchilik*, Ömüraliev is against the commonly accepted term “shamanism” or “totemism” to describe the old Central Asian system of religious beliefs. These terms, originally coined by western scholars, are only partial aspects of the whole system of beliefs and practices of Central Asia. Or, in the author’s words, there were no separate concepts such as “totemism” or “animism” in the understanding of the ancient [Central Asian] nomads. They only saw the world and its dynamics in the correlation between the “Üchtuk” system and the above

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>335</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 13.

mentioned concepts only constituted one side of that three dimensional world.<sup>337</sup> This view is clearly reflected in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Kültegin Inscription, written in Old Turkic on a stele. It begins with the following lines: “When the Blue Sky (Kök) was created above and when the Brown Earth (Jer) was created under it, Human Being (Kishi) was created in between.” Even though this famous line has been a main subject of scholarly discussion since the Inscription was deciphered in 1898 by Thomson, and later translated by Wilhelm Radloff and others, it was not studied comparatively with other religious, philosophical or cosmological thoughts, e.g. the ancient Chinese philosophical thinking such as Daoism.

In his research, Ömüraliev puts this worldview in a context. Within this three-dimensional world, man occupies a special place as a mediator between Kök (Sky) and Earth notes the author, and for that very reason, argues the author, the ancestors of nomads [including the Kyrgyz] worshipped the spirit of the deceased as a protector and bringer of fortune or misfortune if they are not remembered and offered periodical offerings.<sup>338</sup> The author cites some of the well-known verse lines in the epic *Manas* that are used as traditional epithet for the hero Manas:

Altın menen Kümüshtün,  
Shiröösünön butköndöy,  
Ayıng menen Kününgdün,  
Bir özüñön butköndöy,  
Asman menen Jeringdün  
Tiröösünön butköndöy... .<sup>339</sup>

As if He [Manas] is created  
From the mixture of Gold and Silver,  
**And as a supporting beam**

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

**Between Sky and Earth,**  
And as if from the very [light]  
Of the Moon and the Sun . . .

Ömüraliev is correct in asserting that these lines are not just “hyperbolic descriptions or exaggerations,” characteristic of many heroic epics like *Manas*,<sup>340</sup> but rather can be interpreted as the ancient cosmological view of the Turkic peoples.

The Kazakh scholar Karamanulı explains the nature of the religion of Tängri, which like other world religions (Biddhism, Christianity and Islam) fosters some key virtues. It is based on the belief of considering Sky as Father, and the Earth as Mother. If the goals of other religions are to save people from the tortures of the other world, the goal of the religion/worldview of Tengir is to lead a better life in this world.<sup>341</sup>

What is most interesting about the Ömüraliev’s argument is that he is convinced that the philosophy of *Tengirchilik* is closely related to ancient Chinese philosophies, mainly Daoism and Confucianism. The author does not know Chinese, but studied Daoism and the origins of Chinese characters through Russian scholarly works.<sup>342</sup> He asserts that it was not only the nomadic Turks who worshipped Kökö Tengir, Blue Sky/Heaven, but that their neighbors in the south, the Chinese, also considered the Blue Sky a deity. The Turkic word “Kök” or “Tängi” (Sky) is called *Tian* in Chinese and *Ten* in Japanese.<sup>343</sup>

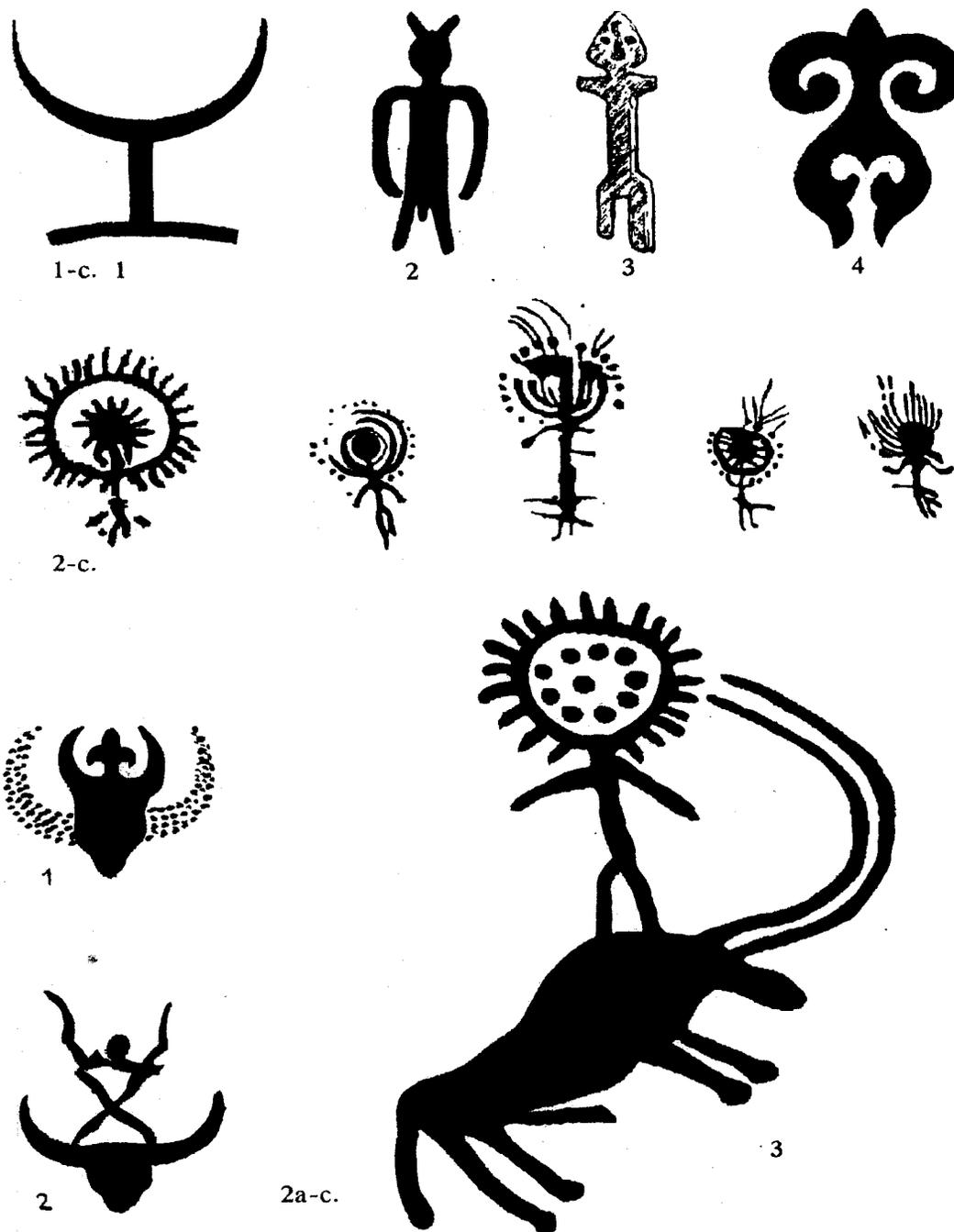
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<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>341</sup> Karamanulı, pp. 11-12.

<sup>342</sup> His Russian is excellent.

<sup>343</sup> Ömüraliev, Ch., pp. 29-30.



1-с. "Башы - Көктө, Буту жерде. 1-Таштагы белги. 2. Таштагы сүрөт. 3. Алтай, шалыг-колдооч, 4. Кыргыз оюму.  
 2-с. "Башы нурга айланган, аягы Түпкө байланган".  
 2а-с. "Үч катмар маңызына макул болсок гана бука жондогу Күнбаш элес сырын жандырат. 1.Кыргыз оюму. 2. Петроглиф, Мугур Саркол. 3. Казакстан, Тамгалы

Figure 18: Ancient symbols representing a three dimensional relationship between Sky, Man, and Earth; Source: Ch. Ömüräliev, *Tengirchilik*, p.26

In Kyrgyz culture everything has its own way, which should be followed to keep the balance in the world. The three major Ways are the Way of Tengir (God), Way of Nature on Earth and Way of Man in between the two.<sup>344</sup> As the author notes, Kyrgyz elderly often say: *Ee balam, ar nersenin özüniün jolu bar*, “Oh, my son, everything has its own Way.” He gives many more examples of such expressions that are still being used in contemporary Kyrgyz society.

The author provides a deep analysis of Kyrgyz oral tradition by comparing some aspects of it with ancient the Chinese philosophy of Daoism. The author primarily cites from the genre of Kyrgyz philosophical poetry composed by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Kyrgyz oral poets, who sang about Nature (World). There is a range of philosophical poems describing the power of Nature in Kazakh and Kyrgyz oral poets’ repertoires. These poems are about *Akkan Suu* (Running/Flowing Water), *Dünüyö* (World), *Shamal* (Wind), *Ot* (Fire) about, *Kiün* (Sun) *Adam* (Man) and *Ajal* (Death). Later, with the coming of Islam, poets incorporated many religious views and ideas of Islam and thus renewed the older themes. Among these poems, the theme of *Akkan Suu* is most popular. Omüraliev cites exclusively from this genre of Kyrgyz poetry, particularly the version of *Akkan Suu* of a well-known Kyrgyz oral poet Jengijok (1860-1916), who is best known for his poems describing the dynamics of the world or life on the Earth by comparing them to “Running (Flowing) Water” (*Akkan Suu*). Ordinary Kyrgyz readers and even some scholars of Kyrgyz oral literature do not understand yet the origin of the poem or the poetic genre in general. Ömüraliev, however, studies the poem very closely and connects it with the ancient wisdom of Daoism, founded by Lao Zi. He quotes Lao Zi, who said:

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

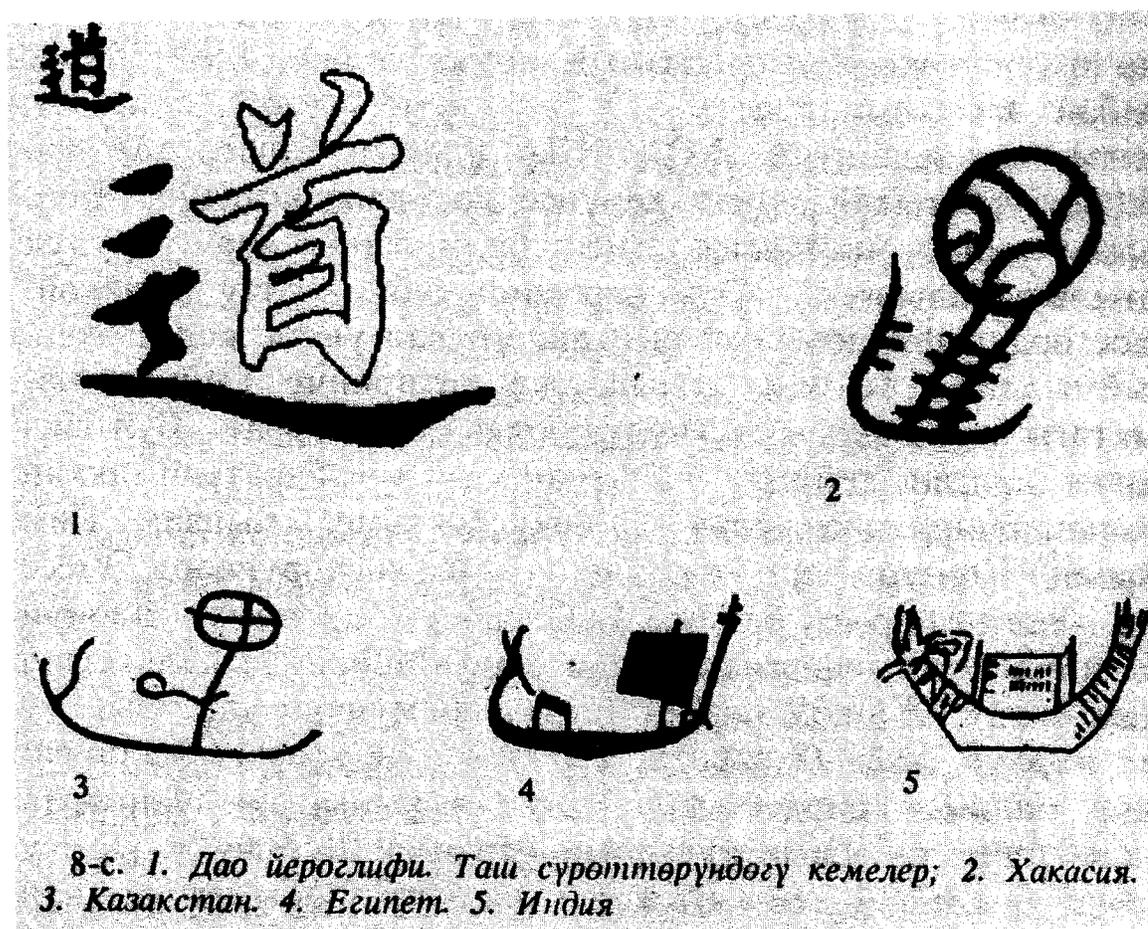


Figure 19: The Dao hieroglyphs. Source: Ch. Ömüräliev, *Tengirchilik*, p. 58

“Water does not differentiate between good and evil, it does kindness to everyone and everything, but does no harm. . . It even flows towards dirty places where no one goes . . . The human soul should be like water . . . Like water, the human being will be transformed into the state of Dao by reaching a life in which his kindness prevails over his evil.”<sup>345</sup> Running water was one of the main allegories used to explain the essence and dynamics of life in Daoist view for “human beings must know the Law of Nature in order to live in harmony with Nature.”<sup>346</sup> The allegory of the running water seems to reflect the main teaching of Daoism which emphasizes the “non-action” (*wu wei*) or natural flow of things in life. This, however, should not be understood literally, but should be seen as a “paradoxical way of allowing the most effective and perfect action to occur.”<sup>347</sup> Ömüraliev cites a popular poetic verse line from *Akkan Suu: Taza bolsong suuday bol baarin juup ketirgen*, “If you want to be pure/clean, be like water, which washes away everything that is dirty.”

The author also notes that *Tengirchilik* cannot be characterized by Daoism alone. Daoism allows us to understand one major component of the issue.<sup>348</sup> To get a fuller picture of *Tengirchilik*, the author turns to another ancient Chinese philosophy, Confucianism. Ömüraliev mentions main virtues of Confucianism which are necessary for human beings to achieve harmony with *Tengir*. Among the concepts of Confucianism the author finds the virtues of “Li,” “ritual formality or etiquette’ followed in all social

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-53.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>347</sup> Moeller Hans-Georg. *Daoism Explained. From the Dream of Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2004, p. VII.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

situations.”<sup>349</sup> Another virtue is “Shu,” which according to Ömüraliev equals *sīy* in Kyrgyz which implies “respect” “mutuality” between seniors and juniors. In Livia Kohn’s explanation: “The senior partner always should treat the junior with care and concern, while the junior owes the senior obedience and respect”<sup>350</sup> The Kyrgyz have a popular saying which gives exactly the same idea: “Uluuga urmat, kichüügö ızat,” “Respect for the elderly (seniors) and care for the young (juniors).” The words “urmat” and “ızat” come from Persian and Arabic. However, the Kazakh and Kyrgyz also use the verb “sīyla-“ “to respect” which is one of the most important words in Kazakh and Kyrgyz vocabulary in educating the young. Moreover, Ömüraliev claims, that the Yin and Yang philosophy, which is believed to be native to the Chinese, in fact belongs to the Turkic/Kyrgyz nomadic people. He studies the meaning and the structure of Kyrgyz traditional ornaments and many other sayings reflecting the binary opposition of things, Yin and Yang in the world.<sup>351</sup> He gives the following Kyrgyz proverbs and sayings as reflections of Yin and Yang philosophy:

“Uluk bolsong, kichik bol,  
Biyik bolsong, japız bol.”

If you are big (great), be small (modest),  
If you are high, be low.

“Uluuga urmat,  
Kichüügö ızaat.”

Reverence for the elderly,  
Respect for the young.

“Karıdan uyat kaytsa,  
Jashtan iyman kaytat.”

<sup>349</sup> Kohn, Livia. *Daoism and Chinese Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Three Pine Press, 2001, p.13.

<sup>350</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>351</sup> *Tengirchilik*, pp. 38-45.



If the elderly lose their dignity,  
The youth loses morality.

“Ashikkan azat,  
Toybogon tozot.”

The impatient one becomes exhausted,  
The insatiable one becomes weary.

“Bay soyuuga kozu tappay,  
Jardīnīn jalgiz kozusun suraptir.”

Not finding a lamb to kill (eat),  
The rich man asked for the poor man’s only lamb.

“Töönün eki örköçhünün birin kesse  
Birinīn küchü jok,  
Eki emcheginin birin kesse,  
Birinīn sütü jok.”

If you cut one hump off a camel,  
The second hump has no strength.  
If you cut off one of her teats,  
The other one gives no milk.

“Totu kush bashin körüp kubanat,  
Butun körüp ardanat.”

When the parrot sees her head, she is happy,  
When she sees her feet, she is ashamed.

“Jalgiz bolsong chogool bol,  
Köp janīnan tūngülsün.  
Jardi bolsong kooz bol,  
Bay malīnan tūngülsün.”

If you are an only child, be strong,  
So the many lose hope for their life,  
If you are poor, be beautiful,  
So the rich lose faith in their wealth [livestock].

“Jakasi jok ton bolboyt,  
Jabuusu jok üy bolboyt.”

There can be no coat without a collar,  
There can be no yurt without a [felt] cover.

“Jakshidan bashchi koysong, el tüzötöör,  
Jamandan bashchi koysong, el jüdötöör.”

If you appoint a good person as a leader,  
The people will prosper,  
If you appoint a bad person as a leader,  
The people will diminish.

“Engkeygenge engkeygin  
Atangdan kalgan kul emes, (Siy-principle)  
Kakayganga kakaygin  
Paygambardın uulu emes.” (Namıs-principle)

Be modest to those who are modest to you,  
They are not your father’s slaves, (“principle of respect”)  
Be haughty to those who are haughty to you,  
They there are not the Prophet’s son. (“principle of honor”)

“Ittin eesi bolso,  
Börünün Tengiri bar.”

If a dog has a master,  
A wolf has Tengir.

“Atkan ok tashtan kaytpayt,  
Elchi kandan tilin tartpayt.”

A shot bullet does not return from the rock,  
The envoy does not hesitate to criticize the khan.

“Joktun bir armanı bar  
Bardın ming armanı bar.”<sup>352</sup>

A poor man has one concern,  
A rich man has thousand concerns.

Ömüraliev presents rich information in his study of *Tengirchilik* and it is impossible to address all of it here. As he told me during our interview, his research is

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid., pp. 181-183.

still in its preliminary stages. If he wants his research findings on *Tengirchilik* and ancient Chinese philosophies to be taken seriously by scholars and readers in general, he needs to learn some Chinese and work in close collaboration with Chinese scholars.

In sum, one finds striking similarities in the approach of the Yi and Kyrgyz intellectuals in studying their history and philosophy. Both groups of intellectuals claim that at the root of the Chinese civilization lies the ancient Yi or Kyrgyz/Turkic worldview. These local-nationalistic discourses appeared after the breakup of Communist ideological hegemony in China and post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and the turn to the “ancient roots” seems to be one way in which local intellectuals react to such a breakup of hegemony. According to Stevan Harrell, one major difference in the ultimate goals of these native intellectuals in China, Eastern Europe, and in Kyrgyzstan is that “Kyrgyz have pride to restore because they have a nation to unite and Islamic fundamentalism to oppose; while the Romanians and the Hungarians etc. only have pride to restore and a nation to unite, and the Yi only have pride to restore, not a nation with official independence status.”<sup>353</sup> In the case of Kyrgyzstan, existence of the *Tengirchilik* nationalistic discourse will bring some balance of religious or philosophical views during the critical period of socio-economic transformation after the collapse of the Communist ideology.

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<sup>353</sup> Oral communication, Seattle, October, 2006.

## *Tengirchilik* Explained by Choyun Ömüraliev

I met Choyun Ömüraliev in the Autumn of 2003 and interviewed him on his ideas and research findings about *Tengirchilik*. After graduating from the Kyrgyz Philology Department of the Kyrgyz State University in Bishkek University in 1973, Ömüraliev worked as a journalist for many years, mostly in Narın, northern Kyrgyzstan. He possesses rich knowledge of Kyrgyz oral literature and nomadic culture for he met with many elderly Kyrgyz men and gathered ethnographic materials from them. As has been mentioned, after the Soviet collapse, like many other intellectuals in the newly independent nation states of Central Asia, Ömüraliev also experienced a major national awakening; he is now one of the most prominent advocates of *Tengirchilik* as a national ideology. Below I present excerpts from my interview with him:

At that time, the Russification process was taking place.<sup>354</sup> We saw and felt that our national heritage was disappearing. So, we thought, how can we preserve it? This was the main problem at that time. How can this very ancient heritage perish so simply? This internal cry pushed me to go deeper into the history and culture of our people. Therefore, I began gathering material. I learned about Asian languages and philosophies. I

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<sup>354</sup> Here Ömüraliev is referring to the unwritten russification policy of the former Soviet Union. Like in many other non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union, in 1980's, before and during perestroika years, the Kyrgyz language was being used less and less, especially in major cities and towns. The capital city of Bishkek only had one Kyrgyz language school, because most Kyrgyz parents gave their children to Russian language schools hoping that their children will find jobs such as government positions if they knew Russian fluently. Most of the school and university textbooks on natural sciences were published in Russian. Many Kyrgyz, who came from the countryside to study in Bishkek, had low self-esteem because they were embarrassed for not speaking Russian or speaking it with a heavy accent. School children were brainwashed about their history. Their history textbooks taught them that before the Great October Revolution [of 1917], the nomadic Kyrgyz were illiterate and lived an uncivilized life in the mountains tribes fighting with one another, and only the "Dawn of October Revolution" brought the "light of civilization" to them. We had to be grateful for our great older brother, Russians and Lenin for saving us. In middle school, everybody had to memorize and recite poems about Lenin, Great October Revolution and Mother Russia composed by Kyrgyz poets in Kyrgyz. One of the most popular one is as follows in English translation:

"Hey Russia, Russia, my dear mother!  
I open my arms wide for a mountain bird like You,  
I cannot resist to say one true word:  
We are only people and human beings because of You!"

read a lot about Japanese Zen philosophy and the philosophy of Buddhism.

*What was your childhood education like?*

In the past, when we were little, our grandfathers and elders used to make us read *Manas* [Kyrgyz national epic] to them. When reading it, we would get bored. However, the time and life of those past years brought our generation into the history and world of *Manas*. [Manas] was indeed nourishment to our mind.<sup>355</sup> Then, when you get older and become more mature, you begin to explore all these things on a new level. By putting all these things together, I saw a big system. Now, when you look at our literature, songs, proverbs, and customs, they all seem to stand separately. However, when you look deeper, there is a big stem, which unites them all. All of these things seem to circle around that stem. As soon as they hold on to that stem, they make up a whole system [please see my comments in the conclusion of this chapter]. That stem is *Tengirchilik*.

*Where did you begin researching Tengirchilik?*

At that time literature on these topics was almost nonexistent [in Russian and in Kyrgyz]. In 1967 there was only one book published on Asian philosophies, called *Materialisty i ateisti drevnego Kitaya* [Materialists and Atheists of Ancient China]. Later, in 1971, books were published such as *Filosofia Drevnego Kitaya* [The *Philosophy of Ancient China*]. I read all these books like I was picking gold from sand. They changed my inner world and thinking. I read all of this literature in Russian. After reading them, you start looking at yourself from outside.

If you don't know your neighbor people's philosophy and history, you cannot respect and value yourself. You begin to respect yourself when you do comparisons. In well-known Chinese literature you find our proverbs and sayings. After that I realized that one should look at our own folklore, customs and rituals from the outside. This resulted in finding out about *Tengirchilik*...

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<sup>355</sup> We had a similar experience in our family while growing up. My father would tell us that we should read *Manas* [he had most of the popular volumes published during the Soviet period]. When I and my younger brothers read it, we would get bored reading the long texts of poetic lines. My father, knowing that the epic was not meant to be read, but sung out loud with a melody and acted out using facial expressions and hand gestures, would read the epic out loud using one of the popular melodies used by singers of *Manas*. That made a big difference.

*Where did the term Tengirchilik come from?*

There is a chapter called “Tengrianstvo” in Oljas’ [Oljas Suleymenov, a well-known Kazakh writer] book.<sup>356</sup> That book had a great impact on me. For many centuries our ancestors have used expressions like *Kökö Tengir* (Blue Tengir/(Sky) God) and *Tengirim koldosun!* “May [my] Tengir (Sky) God protect!” These expressions are the source for the creation of the term.<sup>357</sup> In 1991, after independence, the old regime was gone, and Marxism and Leninism were no longer relevant. But every state should be built on the basis of some kind of an ideology or philosophy. We were faced with this problem and I wrote this book [*Tengirchilik*] at that time. My plans about writing literary works and novels ceased. I was very much drawn in the other direction.

*I read your book Tengirchilik. Your start the first chapter by citing the Kyrgyz poets Kaligul and Jengijok, whose poetry, I think, were influenced by Sufi ideas.*

The Sumerians believed in *Tengirchilik* in 3500 B.C. Their poetry has traces of literary terms of that time. We find the word “dingir” in the Sumerian period. In other words, the word *Tengir* has been in use for 5500 years. Now let's look at all the world religions. Buddhism is 2500 years old, Confucianism and Lao Tsu about 2500, Zoroastrianism is 3000 years old, the Prophet Jesus [Christianity] 2000 years, and the Prophet Muhammad [Islam] is 1400. All of these religions are quite young. And the stems of all these religions lie in *Tengirchilik*, because *Tengirchilik* spread to all of them. You mentioned Sufism. The Sumerians are considered one of the most ancient peoples, and from them the Akkadian civilization grew. They are the ancestors of the Semitic peoples: the Arabs, the Jews, and the peoples of northern Africa. In the heart of these Semitic peoples' culture lies the world of the Sumerians. After the Akkadians, they were divided into the two kingdoms of Babylon and Assyria, whose worldview influenced the Bible, which then later influenced the Quran. The Quran and the Bible are the worldview of the

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<sup>356</sup> Oljas Suleymenov is a well-known Kazakh writer, who writes in Russian. Like many other native intellectuals, he mastered the Russian language and used it in his writing in order to reach a wider audience for his works. Oljas Suleymenov became best known and respected for his political campaign against the Soviet Union's nuclear testing that were conducted in the Semipalatinsk (Kazakh name is “Semei”) region of northwestern Kazakhstan. In 1980's started the movement called “Semei-Nevada” to protest the nuclear testings in Soviet union and in the United States.

<sup>357</sup> It should be noted that after the adoption of Islam the term *Tengir* was replaced with Persian “quday” “God” and Arabic “Allah.” Few people use *Tengir* when referring to God nowadays. Today, it is more common to say “Kuday jalgasin” “May God bless you” than “Tengir jalgasin” or Kuday ursun “May God hit/curse you!” than “Tengir ursun.” But the new terms are used in the previously existing cultural context.

Semitic peoples. The ideas of *Tengirchilik* were transmitted to them through the Sumerians.

You asked about Sufism. The root of Sufism lies in *Tengirchilik*. In world literature no one has discovered the meaning of the word *suf*. They say that it came from a special coat's name worn by men. Actually, it comes from the [Turkic] word [verb] *sev-* (*süy-* in Kyrgyz), 'to love'. It comes from the two and half thousand-year-old Chinese hieroglyph called *she*. It is more than 2500 years old and Islam is only 1400 years old. Contemporary official scholarship maintains that the origin of Sufism is Neoplatonism, which later got transmitted to Islam. In reality, its origin lies in *Tengirchilik*. Everything that we consider not ours is in reality ours. Our worldview spread to all of them. *Tengirchilik* got transmitted to Zoroastrianism. Through the ancient Aries it got transmitted to the sacred books of the Indians. The root of all the sacred Indian Vedas lies in the Rig Vida. The world cannot determine the meaning of the term 'Rig Vida'. The Russians say that 'Vida' came from the Indo-European word *vedat* ('to know') but they cannot decipher the meaning of the word Rig. In my opinion, 'Rig Vida' means "sacred book." *Tengirchilik* also became transmitted to the ancient Indian spiritual and religious world. Each religious teaching, such as Buddhism, has key concepts. For example, Sufism fosters *ishqi* or *ashiq*, love [for God]. Today, many scholars think that these words came from Arabic. However, in reality, they took them from us. Most of these words represent our worldview.

In the Chinese worldview, one of the most prestigious philosophies is Daoism. The word 'dao' came from the Kyrgyz phrase *dal ordo*, which means the "center," or the "central part."

*Is this your own theory?*

I discovered this meaning by studying the etymology of Chinese characters. The Chinese don't know about it themselves. The world functions in this way. We learned about the western worldview through the Russians. Now it is time to look beyond that. It is said that Daoism is about this and that, that it is the true Chinese philosophy; the ancient Indian philosophy is this and the ancient Biblical worldview is that -- in short, everyone has their own interest, because there are things such as Sino-centrism, Asia-centrism, Euro-centrism, and so on. Due to these positions, people have manipulated many things. Today, we continue to teach these things in our schools and universities. However, when one analyzes the [Chinese] letters, one finds our native concepts.<sup>358</sup> Our task is to uncover the deep truth.

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<sup>358</sup> During the interview, Ömüraliyev wrote down many Chinese characters and explained very interestingly how their form and structure reflected Kyrgyz/Turkic religious and ecological concepts and values. He mentioned that he is working alone in this research and hopes to publish his findings about the origin of Chinese characters.

*Is this because historically the nomadic Kyrgyz were in close contact with the Chinese for one thousands of years?*

The first state confederacy in China was the Shan Gin [Shang-Yin], which was from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries. The period from the eleventh to the fifth - fourth centuries is considered the Shoo [Zhou in Chinese] period. Then comes the Qin dynasty. Today, we [Kyrgyz] are celebrating 2200 years of our statehood.<sup>359</sup> This period is the history after the Fin dynasty. Before that, there exist two big periods of Shan Gin and Shoo, which have their own writings. In studying those writings deeply one learns that they are indeed the writings of our Turkic-speaking peoples. World scholarship does not tell you that, because it does not know where the religious writings come from. It is one of the main riddles of modern science.

*Then does it mean the Chinese and Turkic languages are one language?*

[Dastan] Sarıgulov visited Altay, the ancient homeland Turkic peoples. He started his trip in Yakutia and ended in Turkey.<sup>360</sup> Today official scholarship does not know to which language category the Chinese [Mandarin] language belongs. They just categorize it conditionally as Sino-Tibetan. Languages are classified in two ways: one is based on typology and the second on genealogy. Type is based on sentence structure: subject and verb. However, scholars don't know the genealogy of the Chinese language. That's why they just studied it typologically and classified it together with Tibetan and Burmese. Swedish scholar, who tried to reconstruct the Chinese language phonetically, wrote this book that I am holding. Today Chinese scholars use this book, because they don't recognize the phonetic sounds of the ancient Chinese language. They use this book by Bernhard Karlgren. There are some passages that show the commonalities between the Finno-Ugric and Altaic languages. He just followed his intuition, but mostly tried to reconstruct their phonetics. Most of those archaic words end up being related to our language. If this theory becomes recognized, the world sciences would need to be studied quite differently.

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<sup>359</sup> The year 2003 in Kyrgyzstan was announced by UNESCO as the "2200 Year of Kyrgyz Statehood" (Kyrgyz mamlekettүүлүнүн 2200 jıldığı). This date is based on Chinese historical record which mentions the name Kyrgyz and their relationship with Chinese rulers.

<sup>360</sup> Recently a special delegation of Kyrgyz scholars and Turkologists such as Kadıralı Konkobayev visited the Altay region and the northwestern Mongolia which are considered the ancient homeland of nomadic Kyrgyz. They for the first time saw with their own eyes those historical stone monuments and Old Turkic writings from the 7-8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and brought back many valuable materials about the ancient past and culture of the nomadic Kyrgyz. The Turkish government and the Kyrgyz Turkish Manas University in Bishkek sponsored several publications of the new materials and findings of the scholarly expedition.



*When you decipher the Chinese characters, do you work together with Chinese scholars?*

No, they don't try to do this work themselves. They limit their study with hieroglyphs. They talk mainly about the Zhou and Yin periods. The Chinese letters all consist of pictures. Just one character gives several different sounds and meanings. When one breaks it down, one finds its root in our language. There are 214 keys in reading Chinese letters. The letters and these keys work together and create 60,000 hieroglyphs. And all of these 214 keys are now deciphered in our language. I finished them. So, what is "In"? It is a state confederacy. Shang Yan, which means Chayan khan [in Kyrgyz], was one of the ancestors of Manas. Chayan khan's dynasty was called Shanglar, whereas, the Yin were the Böyön khan's dynasty.<sup>361</sup> Writing is one of the first signs of civilization. So, our writing is 4500 years old. The west associates civilization only with sedentary culture. The original meaning of the word "civil" is "sedentary."<sup>362</sup> In other words, civilization became affiliated only with sedentary peoples, who lived in houses and villages; and we were brainwashed by this idea. In reality, the concept of civilization is *rukhaniyat*, spirituality/humanity. Everything, that is created, is done by the human's heart. *Rukhaniyat* should be considered the first determining criteria of civilization. The civilization of nomadic peoples derived from their unique life style and their harmonious relationship with nature. They created their own worldview and philosophy. Therefore, we should not understand the concept of civilization as the property of sedentary peoples. We must also give our own description and thus change the criteria.

*Where do you draw your evidence for that?*

There is a book written by Al Bukhari titled "History of Bukhara." It tells about the history of early Islam in Central Asia in the eighth to ninth centuries, and it describes its brutality. The book was written right at the

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<sup>361</sup>Sayakbay Karalaev's version of *Manas* begins with the following verse lines:

" . . .

His ancestral father is Böyön Khan,  
From Böyön Khan is Chayan Khan,  
From Chayan Khan is Nogoy Khan,

. . .

From Nogoy Khan is Bala Khan

. . .

From Bala Khan is Kara Khan (*Manas*. Version by Sayakbay Karalayev, Vol. I, Frunze: Kyrgyzstan, 1984, p. 27).

<sup>362</sup>The word 'civil' implies sedentary. Modern use of the word civil usually means 'polite', or relating to government activities (like one's civic duty). [The etymology of the word civil, at [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com), says: "Civil: 1387, from L. *civilis* "of or proper to a citizen," alternate adj. derivation of *civis* "townsman" ].

time when these tragic events took place. Later, many facts were hidden and they lied, saying that Islam was adopted peacefully in Central Asia. In this way, Islam was adopted. People have been practicing it together with their native customs. Islam and *Tengirchilik* have one principle. People have been living following their own customs and traditions. What kind of process is taking place today? They [foreign and local Islamic clergy] are forcing people to adopt it fully through radio and television. The process is occurring of introducing by force everything that is taking place in Arabia. However, the culture of those people living in the desert and here is different. They are not compatible. For example, in the south (southern Kyrgyzstan), they tell people to bury their dead as soon as the person dies. Yes, the condition in hot places did not allow them to keep their dead for a long time. But we lived in the cool mountains here, and people waited for each other and showed their last respect to the deceased. People waited for two, five and seven days until all the relatives and people arrived. They sang mourning songs in which they glorified the deeds of the deceased person, starting from his birth until his death. Such a custom does not exist in other cultures. Others think that we are just singing songs, however, the philosophy is different. If people follow what the mullahs say, they will lose their *koshok*, [funeral lament]. *Koshok* is a great world in itself. We have Kanikey's *koshok*, a *koshok* sung in honor of Ormon Khan [19<sup>th</sup> century] and so on. These are not simple rituals, but rather people's worldview. If we lose this tradition, we lose our essence of being a [Kyrgyz] people.

For example, official Islam forbids the worshipping of or requesting help from *mazars* [saint shrines]. They do not want to hear the word *arbak* [deceased's spirit/ancestral spirit].

*You mentioned that people adopted Islam because it was similar to Tengirchilik. At the same time, however, you say that the idea of God and arbak being one thing is not accepted in Islam.*

Nothing is equal to God. Let's see how different religions understand God. For example, in Christianity, God, who sits over there [in the sky] and creates the world. In other words, there is a division between the world and God. The same is true about Allah. The *mullahs* say that Allah creates everything and we are *makuluks* [slaves] before him. Again, there is a space between God and human beings. What is God? This is a dilemma. God exists in everything, alive and inanimate things. There are all kinds of views. *Tengir* constitutes everything: mountains, rocks, rivers, trees, and so on. *Totemism* is viewed as the worship of animals only. It is believed that animals are considered God, or that when people worship *mazars*, they consider them God and therefore holy places. But others [westerners/Christians] think that the real God is left on the side, and that they are worshipping the mountains and rocks. However, in reality, all of

these acts indeed denote worshipping the great force, God, through these objects, which serve as transmitters of their worship and prayers. They become connected with God [“tutumdash” -- “to become connected, to become one”] through transmitters such as the holy *kayberen* [protector/master spirit of wild hoofed animals].<sup>363</sup> The word “totem” comes from our [Kyrgyz/Turkic] word *tutum*. It came from an Indian [Native American] language.

*What can you say about holy paces in Kyrgyzstan such as Kochkor-Ata, İsik-Ata, Cholpon-Ata, Padisha-Ata and others? Are these places actual burial grounds of Sufi oluyas [saints]?*

Yes, if you study their history, most of them are the burial places of some Sufi sheikhs or *oluyas*. According to our worldview, *oluyas* [from the Arab [“awliya”] and *sopus* [Sufis] are mediators between us and God and they transmit our messages to God. Therefore, people consider the *mazars* as holy places and worship them.

There are many historical issues which relate to linguistics. The Sumerian language is a completely different language from the non-Semitic. Nobody knows who the Tocharians are. We are talking about the thirty-fifth century B.C., 5500 years ago. They lived on the banks of the Tigris River. Sumerian and our language share a common root. I saw it in my own analysis. There are similarities in our languages and customs. I cannot pinpoint exactly this or that word, but many words have a common root. We have a dictionary by Khuseyin Karasayev,<sup>364</sup> who classified many words as Arabic or Persian based on phonetic similarities. We should be careful when finding the etymology of words. It is a one-sided view to say that this word is Arabic and that word is Persian. You know Alisher Navoi, a great poet, wrote a book in which he compared the Turkic and Persian languages. Navoi said that Persian is a rich language and all literature is written in Persian. However, he also said that the Turkic language was not less than Persian and Arabic, especially in terms of coherence and expressiveness. He gave examples of words in Turkic and Persian. Many of those words and terms were directly related to nomadic culture. Just by looking at words in the dictionary and saying that they come from Arabic or Persian, we are degrading our language and putting the others above ourselves. This is because we don't know who we are, our history and philosophy.

<sup>363</sup> The power of *kayberen* is well reflected in the Kyrgyz epic “Kojash.” The electronic version of the epic's English translation can be found on the following url:

<sup>364</sup> Karasayev, Khusain. *Özdöshtürülgön sözdör. Sözdük. 5100 söz* (Loan Words [in the Kyrgyz Language]. Dictionary. 5100 Words). Frunze: Kyrgyz Sovet Entsiklopediasinin bashki redaksiyasi, 1986.

### *Tengirchilik* Explained by Dastan Sarıgulov

The second prominent advocate of *Tengirchilik* is Dastan Sarıgulov, the founder of the *Tengir Ordo* Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Kyrgyz National Heritage, and the author of several small monographs on Kyrgyz nomadic heritage and *Tengirchilik*.<sup>365</sup> Sarıgulov was born in 1947 into a large family, which had eleven children. After graduating from the Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) Engineering and Construction Institute in 1970, he held various positions in construction related jobs until 1990. Later he served as the head of the Prdzeval'k city [now called Kara-Kol] council and as the secretary of the İsik-Köl provincial committee. From 1990 till 1999 he served as the governor of Talas province in northern Kyrgyzstan and also as the president of the state company called *Kyrgyzaltın* (Kyrgyz Gold). In 1999, after being dismissed by President Akayev, Sarıgulov established his nongovernmental organization *Tengir Ordo* with the goal of preserving and promoting Kyrgyz national heritage. Many prominent Kyrgyz scholars, writers, intellectuals and also students became members of the Foundation. After the March, 2005 revolution in Kyrgyzstan, which became known as the "Tulip Revolution," the newly elected President Kurmanbek Bakiev appointed Sarıgulov as State Secretary of the Kyrgyz Republic. He held this position for almost a year. On January 4<sup>th</sup> 2006, under the decree of President Bakiev, a new committee, consisting of more than twenty people (representing various socio-political, academic,

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<sup>365</sup> See the Bibliography.

gender, and ethnic groups) was formed to create a state/national ideology. Dastan Sarıgulov, who was still serving as State Secretary, was assigned to chair this committee.

I was first introduced to Dastan Sarıgulov in his office through his assistant Sabira, a bright and energetic young woman. One of the objectives of the Foundation is to promote traditional Kyrgyz music played on various instruments such as *komuz*, *kil kayak*, *chopo choor*, and supporting the local masters who make those traditional instruments. I had also heard that Sarıgulov himself played the *komuz* well. At that time, I was looking for a good *komuz* to buy for myself, so his assistant Sabira told me that Sarıgulov knows one of the best *komuz* makers in Kyrgyzstan, named Suragan. When I met Sarıgulov for the first time he greeted me warmly and enthusiastically. He had brought one of his *komuz* and kindly asked me to sing, which I did. After a while, the above mentioned *komuz* maker came carrying several of his new *komuz*. Sarıgulov introduced us to each other. I was told to test play all of his instruments and chose the one I liked. So, with Suragan's help, I selected one *komuz* and purchased it right away. After Suragan left, I told Sarıgulov about myself, my study in the States, and about my current ethnographic research on Kyrgyz nomadic heritage and Islamic revival after the independence. When I mentioned my intent to interview him on the very new subject of *Tengirchilik*, and about the activities of his foundation, Sarıgulov became happy and began talking enthusiastically about them. I had not brought my tape recorder with me, so our first conversation on the subject was an informal one.

During my first informal meeting with Dastan Sarıgulov in his Bishkek office, I asked him whether I could have a formal interview [with a tape recorder] with him on his ideas of *Tengirchilik*. We agreed to meet at one of the good Uighur restaurants in

Bishkek. My father, who is a historian, happened to be in Bishkek at that time and he also joined us, for he had read some of Sarıgulov's booklets about *Tengirchilik*, and thus was interested in meeting with him and learning more about it. My father and I had prepared a list of questions that we wanted to ask him. We first ate our food, and then began our discussion on the subject. It was a very interesting discussion and interview, which lasted for two hours. Even though Sarıgulov does not talk much about the relationship between *Tengirchilik* and Chinese Daoism, he supports Ömüraliev's approach and ideas. Below are the excerpts from our interview.

**Mamatkerim, my father:** *Do the Kyrgyz need a national ideology?*

There won't be any development without an ideology. We say that we cannot find the right ideology. We are like a person who is looking for his whip, which is hanging on his belt. The Communist ideology lived for a hundred years. The Capitalist ideology has lived for two and half centuries. However, it has already reached its end, its limit, because Nature has put an end to the Capitalist ideology by saying: "Hey, I just can't take your endless accumulation of wealth any more!"

The Kyrgyz have a history, which is more than three thousand years old. It is impossible for the Kyrgyz to find an ideology other than *Tengirchilik*. National heritage is the most sacred ideology for the Kyrgyz. Our national heritage is like a pine tree. If the pine tree's root grows very deep, it will grow tall and healthy. Our heritage is like the root of that pine tree. There is no better ideology for the Kyrgyz. No one can create it, and, therefore, one should not look for another one besides the one that already exists. Man has thirty-two body parts. If he loses one of them he will not be a complete person. Let's say that he got blind or deaf or his arms and legs were paralyzed. What would his situation be like? A nation that distanced itself from its national heritage would also be in a similar situation. How are we doing today? We cannot move our legs and we just lie there. We can neither see, nor hear, nor speak, but we want to find our place in the world community. We have forgotten about our national heritage. We do not speak our native language<sup>366</sup> nor do we know about our history. We desperately need our national heritage, because it is our soul.

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<sup>366</sup> He is referring to those Kyrgyz who received their education in Russian and thus speak Russian as their first language.

**Mamatkerim:** *However, Kyrgyzstan is a small country in which many other nationalities live. What will happen to them?*

Our national heritage, our customs and traditions, are based on principles maintaining humanity and faith “iyman.” The other nations are in need of these values. For example, the Russians lack faithfulness [iymani jok].<sup>367</sup> If we revive our national heritage it would not harm them at all. On the contrary, they would benefit from it.<sup>368</sup> If, in case, they do not like it, then they have their own homeland. They can go and live there. We are mistaken in our current national ideology, which proclaims: “Kyrgyzstan is our common home.”<sup>369</sup> For more than two and a half thousand years our ancestors fought and shed their blood for this land. At that time there was no world community, no laws and borders. Whoever was strong and powerful defeated the others. Our country was built on our ancestors’ bravery and on the tears and lives of our orphans and widows. And, all of a sudden, why should the Russians, Dungans, and others who came just recently, make this place their homeland? This [slogan] is just a political slogan. This is the home of the Kyrgyz.

**Mamatkerim:** *Is it possible to raise Tengirchilik to the level of other world religions?*

We can say that *Tengirchilik* is the most ancient religion or worldview. There is historical evidence for that. Leo Oppenheim, an American historian at the University of Chicago has studied ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> “Russians have no faith” does not refer to their religious belief. The word “iyman” “faith,” which comes from Arabic, has a wide meaning in Kyrgyz language and culture. In Islam, it means that the person has faith in God. In addition to this meaning, among the Kyrgyz the term implies that a person is a trustworthy, well-behaved, kind, respectful of elders and parents. Many elderly people regret that many young Kyrgyz lost their language and attachment to their native culture, and with that they also lost their “iyman.” If a person does bad things such as stealing, lying, using bad swear words, he will be “iymansiz” or “iymani jok” “one who has no faith” and therefore commits bad things.

<sup>368</sup> There are some major differences between Russian and Kyrgyz culture or in the way two people interact in their own society and in family relationships. When their children or someone behaves or does things differently, Kyrgyz parents often say “Orus bolup kalıptır” “He/she has become a Russian,” “Oruska okshop,” “Like a Russian.” For example, if a guest comes to your house, according to Kyrgyz culture all the children who are at home, no matter how young they are, if they can speak, they must approach the guest and greet him/her. If one does not care to greet with and speak to the guests, he/she will be criticized with above expressions. So, Sarıgulov believes that Russians can learn many good behaviors in terms of treating the elderly, parents, and guests in general, with great respect.

<sup>369</sup> Here he is referring to the national ideology which was promoted by former president Askar Akayev. Akayev, who was educated in St. Petersburg, knows and very much respects Russian language and culture. During his presidency, he always was careful about not hurting the feelings of the ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan. He gave the Russian language the official status to be used in Kyrgyzstan along with the state language, Kyrgyz.

<sup>370</sup> Oppenheim, A. Leo. *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

His book was published in 1964 and we translated it into Russian in 1990. It discusses many writings on clay. Their king, Sarbon Akasdkiy [Sarbon I] was called by the name *Tengir*. It is written that until the Hammurabi period, all the king's power was bestowed by God. Sarbon's name was written as Sarbon Akad Tengir. In other words, *Tengir* was perceived as some kind of a holy power in the sky, and kings became kings by the order or will of *Tengir*. People also considered *Tengir* their protective God, and therefore, *Tengirchilik* is the oldest religion of all.

The uniqueness of *Tengirchilik* lies in that that it does not identify God with a human being. After *Tengir* comes Nature. Nature is the force which carries out *Tengir's* orders and therefore, we should worship Nature.<sup>371</sup> The father of humanity is Light, his mother is Earth, his blood is water, and his soul is . . .? say the Kyrgyz. "Teng," which means equal, treats all, animals, plants, and human beings, equally. "İr" means "iri", big, unlimited. "Teng+ir" translates literally as "Equal" + "Unlimited/Big."<sup>372</sup>

When Christianity emerged, many other peoples and nations adopted it. Their worldview became limited by the teachings of Christianity. Our greatness lies in that that we did not adopt it, because already two or three thousand years before that we had a long-established worldview. Why did the Kyrgyz survive? It was because of their lifestyle and *Tengirchilik*. When does the nation cease to exist? It is when power is hereditary or when power stays in one person's hand for a long time. When the nomadic Kyrgyz elected a bad khan, their enemies easily destroyed them. However, people could take away their leader's power if he was weak and unjust.<sup>373</sup> In nomadic life there were no tax collectors and no KGB. And the Khan had no choice but to listen to his people. Kyrgyz society was the highest peak of social equality. If there is no equality and justice, a society will be weak and divided. It will not be able to withstand its enemies. The Kyrgyz fostered equality and internal unity, and thus were able to survive.

What is happening today to human kind with the globalization process? I write in my book that globalization took everything into itself

<sup>371</sup> Here Sarıgulov explain very clearly why the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz worshipped Nature and its forces in the past. This description of the native religion of nomadic Kazakhs [and Kyrgyz] is criticized by scholars like Privratsky as an invalid concept invented by Chokan Valikhanov in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>372</sup> The term is used in the old Turkic texts from the 7-8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. There the term is spelled as "tängri." Modern Kyrgyz does not have consonants clusters and therefore the Kyrgyz pronounce it as "tengir." Both words of the term "teng" and "iri" exist in modern Kyrgyz which mean "equal" and "big, major." The word *tengger* also exists in Daur Mongol and its root "teng" has a similar meaning "equilibrium" or "equality." *Shamans and Elders* . . ., p. 110.

<sup>373</sup> He is right. Unlike in sedentary societies, in Kyrgyz nomadic society khans were elected according to an ancient tradition: the elected khan was put on a white felt (ak kiyiz) and lifted up and down by his people. In the epic *Manas*, the hero Manas, when elected as khan, goes through the same protocol. According to Ilse Cirtautas, this act signified that people had the power to raise him up as a khan but also to put him down, if he was unjust or weak, symbolizing true "democracy."



by computer technology, internet connections, and trade. It is only religious diversity that is keeping people apart. In the end, globalization will win over religious separation, because religions have lost their power and relevance. Why? Because people no longer believe in the ideas which existed two thousand years ago. Religions themselves are divided into hundreds of different sects. Islam has seventy sects. Things that were said a thousand years ago do not conform to today's life. People are divided. All of these religions will perish eventually, because globalization fell from above by the order of *Tengir*. Globalization is like a big pit, and people cannot get out of it. Neither religions nor any scientific invention can help people get out. The mullahs cannot do anything. One superpower country cannot solve the problems of globalization. Today, only eight developed countries are solving the fate of the world. They are interested in feeding people's stomachs. They do not care about their internal/spiritual needs. We cannot solve ecological problems by introducing laws, or by force. They can only be solved if human beings unite. And on what basis will that unification take place? Parties cannot unite on a global scale. Only *Tengirchilik* can unite them. Why? Because in *Tengirchilik*, Nature is considered superior to human beings, not the other way around. Human beings depend on Nature in order to survive. Today, we support the idea of eco-centrism. We are worried about the pollution of nature, water, and air. These problems can be solved if people make an internal revolution in their way of thinking and put Nature above themselves. The Kyrgyz have never put themselves above Nature. They have always considered it sacred and great.

Another thing is humanism. They considered grass, water, trees, and so on as possessing souls. It was *ubal* (wasting, bad luck) to mistreat any of them.<sup>374</sup> You see how far it goes. What has happened to a human being today? He has turned into a beast. An American democrat or leader says that one should forget about shame, honor, and pride. He says that the more deeply we forget, the more we will become like them. I read an American book called "Marriage Contract" in which husband and wife have to sign a contract before they get married. They are getting married but do not know each other's intentions. One of the sentences read like this: "If you kill me, you will not get my money...." They have sunk to such a level! This is not the way human beings should act. They will not understand our customs, because the American nation was created from peoples of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They treat their laws or contracts as religion. For example, my next book will be about law,

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<sup>374</sup> Majority of Muslim clergy and scholars consider that the concept of *ubal* came from Islam to the Kyrgyz, whereas Sarıgulov and many other Kyrgyz intellectuals consider it as a native concept. What is exactly considered *ubal* in Kyrgyz/Central Asian culture? The first thing which comes to any Kyrgyz's mind is the expression "Nandı tebelebe, tashaba, ubal bolot!" "Don't step on or throw away bread, you will suffer from it soon or later." Another expression is "... ubalına kalba" "don't be left in the *ubal* or curse or something. It will be *ubal* if you kill animals for no reason; if you mistreat or swear at your parents. In general, mistreatment or wasting is considered *ubal*."

and I say that laws, which are created by human beings, can never be the basis of life. The first reason is that laws adopted quickly will have a lot of shortcomings. Secondly, one needs a thousand people to control their realization. Therefore, the idea that laws are the basis of society is nonsense. Only God or *Tengir's* law can become the basis of our lives.<sup>375</sup> Not even one president or parliament can change it. Therefore, the Kyrgyz adopted customs which conformed to Nature's law, and legitimized them with their lives. They did not leave these rules in writing. They became their way of life and behavior, for example, pouring water onto a guest's hands and receiving his/her blessing; mounting the horse this way and dismounting it that way; teaching a girl how to jump over a small creek with the hem of her dress covering bottom.<sup>376</sup> They were taught about each step they made. However, we no longer value those teachings much.

In *Tengirchilik* there is no mediator between *Tengir* and humans. Today, whichever religion you take, they are like a country unto themselves. There are *ajıs* [persons who have made a hajj to Mecca], *muftiys* [leaders of Muslims], and others who govern it. These people are humans and make mistakes. They are unnecessary mediators between God and people. The Kyrgyz were in direct contact with God. Their lifestyle was such that they depended on Nature. When they went through difficult mountain passes or were left alone in the wilderness as prey for wolves, they prayed for their lives by begging God.<sup>377</sup>

Another quality of *Tengirchilik* is that it was never the right hand of state power and it never exploited people. *Tengirchilik* did not get fractured within itself, for it has been functioning for more than two thousand years. The Russians fought with and killed each other because of their religious differences. In the past, there were no publishing houses. People wrote and copied the religious texts by hand. In doing that, some words or sentences got omitted, thus creating differences between various texts. This created in people a lot of conflicts of thoughts. In *Tengirchilik*, there is no dogmatism. Nature will never be divided. Nature is the holiest "book" in the world. Nature is a prophet with many powerful qualities and forces.

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<sup>375</sup> In this regard his idea is similar to the Islamic and Christian beliefs that only God's rule should be established on Earth to govern the people.

<sup>376</sup> These customs and values are still fostered among many Kyrgyz in the countryside. See my comments on Chapter 1 where I talk about the Central Asian custom of pouring water into guests' hands before the meal is served and receiving their blessings. In Central Asian nomadic culture, one should mount and dismount the horse from the left side of the horse. Traditionally, women did not wear pants like men, but dresses or *beldemchis* and when mounting and dismounting from a horse they always made sure that their clothes under their dress is not revealed.

<sup>377</sup> This is true. When I was growing up in the mountains with my grandparents, whenever there was a strong wind, loud thunder, lightening, or when we passed through dangerous steep passes, we prayed to God to save us saying: "Oh, kagılayın/aylanayın Kuday (not Allah) özüñg [Kirsiktardan] saktay kör!" "Oh, dear God, please save us Yourself [from any misfortunes]!" When there was a new moon, we stepped outside from yurt and bowed to the moon three times.

It is a shame that we do not know about our own religious worldview; it is much older than Islam, which appeared only in the sixth century. The Kyrgyz achieved a lot before Islam. And on the basis of which belief and with whose support did they achieve it? *Tengirchilik's*. And we are afraid to talk about *Tengirchilik*, which lives in our blood.

**Mamatkerim:** *However, Dastan Sarıgulov, very few Kyrgyz may understand Tengirchilik at your level.*

You are right. Very few people understand it deeply. There are people, however, who know old customs such as purifying with *archa*, [juniper tree leaves] smoke, and visiting *mazars* [shrines of saints or other holy places]. The Kyrgyz people did not fully adopt Islam either, because their life style did not permit customs like women wearing the *paranja* [veil].<sup>378</sup> Among the Kyrgyz, *Tengirchilik* was not practiced as a religion, but rather it turned into their everyday life activities and beliefs. It is closely related to the *arbak* [deceased's spirit or ancestral spirit]. This does not exist in Islam. *Tengirchilik* lost a lot of its customs and values, because when Attila conquered Europe, he did it with *Tengirchilik*. Many Europeans adopted this worldview, because they thought that Attila's protective God was powerful. They engraved signs of *Tengirchilik* on their walls and named their cities and mountains *Tengir*. At that time Christianity was not very strong. After it became strong in the seventh to eighth centuries, all of those people, who had practiced *Tengirchilik* were beheaded. Today, there are people who traveled to Europe by sea and remained there, for example the Hungarians.

Then Sarıgulov had some interesting things to say about the relationship between the nomads and nomadic life in the mountains.

How many people gave their lives and shed their blood for Islam? The Kyrgyz resisted Islam for many centuries. What was the reason for that? First of all, the root of *Tengirchilik* had gone too deep. Second, their nomadic life played an important role in preserving their worldview. Their enemies could conquer them, but it was impossible for them to move

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<sup>378</sup> Kazakh and Kyrgyz women traditionally wore different types of headdresses according to their age and marital status, but they never covered their face, even after the adoption of Islam. Elderly and married women wear their scarf differently than in other Muslim countries. Young unmarried girls traditionally wore caps with owl feathers on top to protect them from evil spirits. Women did not hide their hair, all of them braided their hair and decorated them with silver jewelry.

constantly with their soldiers. Therefore, we must thank our mountains. We do not know the value of our mountains.<sup>379</sup>

Scientifically, mountains have a special effect. When people are tired and want to have a rest, they do not go to deserts or empty fields, but rather go to the mountains. Why? There is a physical reason for that. The gravitational and electromagnetic fields are different in the mountains. It is our nerves that make our heart beat and blood vessels transport blood throughout the body. Nerves have an electric current, which comes from our soul. For example, electromagnetic waves have an influence on our health. Some sick people feel better when they go to the mountains, first, because of the gravitational and magnetic fields, and second, because water and the mountains are alive. Each person's blood is renewed. When that blood renewal goes wrong, some people get sick. Mountain water has a genetic memory. Genes are part of DNA, and there is no DNA in water, except the creatures which inhabit the water. Water is just hydrogen and oxygen. It remembers nothing – it has no brain to remember. It just flows from place to place because it is drawn by gravity, which is not found in dead water. And because of this genetic memory, all processes which take place in the human body function properly. It is said that if one adds one liter of mountain water onto ten liters of dead water, the live water will cleanse it all within twenty-four hours. We know that 80% of the human body consists of water. Our brains are made up of 92% water. Therefore, the Kyrgyz developed the art of *chechendik*, [eloquence] and *tökmölük* [the traditional art of improvising oral poetry]. *Tökmölük* is in our blood and no other nation in the world can compete with us.<sup>380</sup> However, we do not value this quality of ours, which seems to have come from above. The Russians brainwashed us for a hundred years by saying that we are stupid and wild people with no culture and history. They did so because they

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<sup>379</sup> Here it is important to mention the Kültegin Inscription from the 8<sup>th</sup> century where the Bilge Qagan, brother of Kültegin, strongly warns his Türk people not to go far from the “Ötüken yış” mountain. He tells them that if they leave their home in the Ötüken Mountain, they will be destroyed by the enemy. Nomads really relied on their mountains for protection.

<sup>380</sup> Among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, oral improvising poets are called *tökpe* (Kazakh) and *tökmö* (Kyrgyz) *akındar*. The term comes from the verb: “tök-“ “to pour out.” In other words/songs pour out like water from the mouth of oral poets. Kazakhs and Kyrgyz can really be proud of their oral tradition which produced many great improvising poets who are still continuing the tradition of their ancestors. Every year, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz organize the “Aytış” contest where individual *akins* compete with one another in a singing contest by improvising verse lines keeping initial alliteration and end rhyme. After the independence, there was established “Aytış Society” [Aytış koomu] created by Kyrgyz young and elderly poets and Sarıgulov’s Tengir-Ordo Foundation is one of the main supporters of the Society. The tradition is preserved in the following way: Master or each *tökmö akın*, master poet, has his own pupil(s) whom he trains by teaching improvisation skills, different melodies, and singing styles. They compare the training of young poets to a hunting bird that is trained by a *sayapker*, hunter who hunts with birds. The term to train a bird is “kush tapta” and the verb “tapta-“ is also used when referring to the training of younger poets by master poets. It should be noted that there are well-known female *akins* among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz who compete with male *akins*. Female *akins* and singers, who sing with the accompaniment of *komuz* and *dombra*, are highly respected in Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies.

wanted to kill our spirit and conquer us. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Peter I could not defeat the Kyrgyz of the Yenisey. For about one hundred years, Tsarist Russia tried to defeat them, but could not. The Russians then realized that the Kyrgyz were brave and stubborn people, and therefore should be treated carefully. If you look at historical books from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, you do not find the word Kazakh in them,<sup>381</sup> but Kyrgyz. This shows that the Kyrgyz had a great influence and place in history.

When Konkobayev [Kyrgyz Turkologist] went to China last year, the Chinese told him that there was a *khan saray* [king's palace] about 500 km to the south of Beijing. It was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. by order of a Chinese king. At that time they received many Kyrgyz envoys. The Chinese thought the Kyrgyz, who lived in the mountains, would suffer from the desert heat, so they built a palace in honor of them. Today, that palace is a museum. Everything is written there: in which year which Kyrgyz envoy came and why, what he brought as a present, and so on. So how can we say that the Chinese do not know about the Kyrgyz? It is the work of our ancestors. We, on the other hand, do not have anything to show. For one and a half centuries we have been destroying our language, customs and traditions. We even refuse to remember those ancestors. This year has been declared as the Year of Kyrgyz Statehood by UNESCO. I suggested to our politicians that they should stop their "politicking" and help develop our national heritage, by going to various regions of Kyrgyzstan, speaking about Kyrgyz history and culture, and paying respect to the spirits of our ancestors. I asked them to organize concerts of traditional music and raise the meaning of the word "nation". But no, they do not listen.

**Mamatekrim:** *Is it because the politicians do not understand Tengirchilik well?*

That's correct, they don't.<sup>382</sup> I myself haven't understood *Tengirchilik* deeply enough. It is indeed our national culture and heritage, which we cannot throw away. It is not about *Tengirchilik* per se, but rather about our language, culture, history, genealogy, and customs. I recently understood that Kyrgyz traditional customs are indeed knowledge and education. It is a knowledge that came from real life experiences. Society and customs exist in harmony because the Kyrgyz foster the values of mutual respect,

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<sup>381</sup> He is right. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Kazakhs were also called Kyrgyz by the Russians.

<sup>382</sup> There are some Kyrgyz politicians and businessmen who value the Kyrgyz traditional customs such as horse games and oral tradition and Sarıgulov works with them closely. During the *aytış* competition, they sponsor the event by giving prizes such as a horse, car or money to the winners. However, most of them, like ordinary people do not understand the *Tengirchilik* concept as deeply as the advocates or scholars do.

that is, respect for the elderly as well as for the young. All of our customs are knowledge, eternal knowledge.

**Mamatkerim:** *We should introduce a subject on traditional customs in schools.*

I prepared teaching curricula from first grade through tenth grade, and I saw a positive outcome. Among teenagers, the number of crimes decreased by 30%, because they looked at things quite differently. *Tengirchilik* would be a great national ideology for us if it would be carried out.

**Mamatkerim:** *I think one should write about it in simple language so that everyone can understand.... Most of these customs or moral values exist in Islamic teachings as well, therefore, can one use the mixture of these two worldviews?*

Today, a majority of the people have adopted Islam and its values of faithfulness and good manners. When the Communist regime was trying to destroy people's *ıyman* [faith; morality, humanity], people had to hold onto Islam. And it would be wrong to dismiss the good sides of Islam. Our people already rejected its negative sides one thousand years ago, for example, our women never wore the *paranja* [veil]. The reason the Kyrgyz adopted Islam is because they saw that it held similar beliefs and values. Islam integrated many aspects of *Tengirchilik*, which existed four thousand years ago. Before the Prophet *Muhammad* there were three prophets, one of whom was a woman. Why could not they spread their religion? It is because they were not diplomats or politicians, whereas the Prophet *Muhammad* was a very good politician. That is why he was successful. Islam did not bring any new religious teachings to us. For example, when the *mullahs* came to the Kyrgyz, the Kyrgyz asked the mullahs what they would teach them. Our ancestors listened to what they had to say, and realized that they already possessed all those nice qualities. People go to mosques, but do wrong things after that. *Tengirchilik*, on the other hand, became their lifestyle, customs, and habits. They do not have this kind of closeness or intimacy with Islam. The nomadic life and *Tengirchilik* fit together quite well. The nomads got rid of all the [Islamic] things that were unsuitable for their lifestyle, and adopted and preserved the things which did not contradict their existing life and beliefs. Today, two billion people practice Christianity, and one billion are Muslims. Only 10% of these people really believe in their religion. The Kyrgyz preserved

their great customs without any mullahs, but we do not appreciate this *uluuluk* [greatness], which has been transmitted from our ancestors.

Recently, we [the Tengir-Ordo Foundation] received a letter from some Koreans in Korea. They wrote: You, the Kyrgyz are indeed the people who can be a good example to humankind. We do not have the same kind of tradition of respecting the elderly. We became *Mankurts* [person who does not remember who he or she is and who his or her parents are and to which tribe he or she belongs] You possess many good humane qualities, from which other people in the world can learn. Your wealth is your people, who preserved real traditions and customs.

**Mamatkerim:** *Yes, I agree with all the things you said. However, people who live in the cities, especially the young Kyrgyz in the Chüy Valley, have long forgotten their traditional culture.<sup>383</sup> We cannot just talk about ideology alone, shouldn't we also pay attention to our economy.*

There is no conflict with the economy. It is incorrect to pit the two things against each other. If you went to the United Arab Emirates, you would be surprised, seeing their politics. I have been to many other countries, like Japan, China, and Iran, and I saw that these people have been preserving their national heritage without interfering with their economic development. For example, I went to Tokyo with a delegation. We were in a big hotel and we were waiting for the Japanese delegation to arrive. We sat in the lobby, and while we were waiting, we ordered tea. We were astonished, seeing those waitresses who sat on their knees while offering us tea. That is their traditional way of showing respect. Today Japan is the second most developed country after America, and it has still preserved its traditional culture. That is why you are mistaken if you say that tradition keeps people from development. On the contrary, tradition helps development. We have a clear, four thousand year old path, which our ancestors established for us, and if we just keep going on that path, we will do fine. We have many of our old traditional customs and values in our blood. So, we do not need any other ideology. We just need to be ourselves. Our tragedy is that we refuse to be Kyrgyz. If the right person came to power, our economy would go up in three years. There is no major difficulty in Kyrgyzstan. A simple example is water.<sup>384</sup> Today the

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<sup>383</sup> The Chüy Valley in which Bishkek is located had received the most Russian settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This resulted in the loss of many settlements of the nomadic Kyrgyz and the grazing land of the livestock. Today almost all the village names in the Chüy Valley have Russian names such as Pokrovka, Bystrovka, etc. Kyrgyz, who became the minority in the Valley, are considered more Russified than those Kyrgyz living in other parts of the country.

<sup>384</sup> Kyrgyzstan has a lot of fresh mountain water, which, if used correctly, would help to develop the country's economy.

price of one liter of water is equal to the price of one kilo of flour. In Japan, one buys two or three liters of gasoline for the price of one liter of water. We have plenty of water. There is no lack of technology, cars, and computers in the world, but clean water is a big problem. Clean water is the source of life. Human beings have invented everything one needs; however, one does not have to invent clean water.

**Elmira:** *As you said previously, one of the reasons that Tengirchilik has been preserved is because of the nomadic lifestyle. For the last fifty or sixty years, however, the nomadic life has ceased to exist. People who live in cities do not know about the nomadic life, only herders know about it. How can we teach the city people about the values of nomadic life and Tengirchilik?*

Life is hard in the cities and therefore, people do not value it [*Tengirchilik*]. When their lives get a bit better, then if you tell them and explain to them about *Tengirchilik* on TV and radio, and write about it in newspapers and journals, they no doubt will adopt it and apply it in their live. It is already in their blood, and you just have to push their button to activate it.

**Elmira:** *What about other peoples, like the Siberians and Mongols, who also led a nomadic life? Was Chingiz Khan's religion Tengirchilik?*

Among the Central Asian nomadic peoples, the Kazakhs became sedentary two centuries ago, and the Tartars became settled three centuries ago. In the north, the Yakuts ride deer. The Central Asian nomadic people who became sedentary last were the Kyrgyz. Therefore, we preserved our national heritage the best. Yes, about Chingiz Khan. A Tatar author named Bezertinov wrote a 750-page book titled "Tengrianstvo: religiia tiurkov i mongolov".<sup>385</sup> I talked to him when he visited Kyrgyzstan, and he said that Chingiz Khan was a man who truly worshipped *Tengir*. It was his great grandson, Börte Khan, who introduced Islam. The heads of 180 of his *noyons* [soldiers] and leaders were cut off because they refused to adopt Islam. Bezertinov says: "Why are we [the Turks] not successful any more? Attila and Chingiz Khan conquered the world because they believed in and lived by *Tengirchilik*. We adopted Islam, but we do not understand it well. We lost our faith by reciting false Quranic verses." Their (Tatars')

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<sup>385</sup> Bezertinov, R. N. *Tengrianstvo: religiia tiurkov i mongolov (Tengrianity: Religion of the Turks and Mongols)*. Kazan: SLOVO, 2004.



goal is to revive the Hunno-Turanian [Hun Turkic] civilization and to restore the old Orkhon Turkic alphabet (from the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) by publishing newspapers and journals in that alphabet. In this regard, the Tatars are far ahead of us. He says that Islam is like a *chinjir* [chain] to us. We cannot get rid of it unless we come to *Tengirchilik*.

Last year I met some Japanese people who came to Kyrgyzstan. I asked them why they came to Kyrgyzstan, and they said that they were searching for their roots. We went looking for our roots in Turkey and then we went to the Uzbeks they said. They were not close to us. We came to Kyrgyzstan a year ago and we found our roots. We must learn Kyrgyz in order to reach the end of that root, they said. The man who accompanied them spoke mostly Russian, and I told them that they should go to At-Bashi [a mountainous region in northern Kyrgyzstan] and other regions to learn Kyrgyz. They also said that we were the same people because we share similar instruments, customs and grammar. So, among Central Asians, the Japanese feel closest to the Kyrgyz.

**Mamatkerim:** *Is there a next world [narkı düynö] in Tengirchilik?*

Islam and Christianity emphasize the horror in the next world, whereas, in *Tengirchilik* there is no such thing. The dead person turns into an *arbak* [spirit]. One pays for all his wrongdoings in this world. The peculiarity of *Tengirchilik* lies in this. The nomad suffers not in the next world but in this world. There is the next world in *Tengirchilik* where the spirits of ancestors or deceased relatives go, but there is no such a thing called a Hell [tozok].

**Mamatkerim:** *Among the Muslims, there are five pillars [besh parız] that people should carry out. Is there such a thing in Tengirchilik as well?*

Dogmatism and rituals bring religion to destruction. There is no dogma in *Tengirchilik*. For thousands of years it did not order people to do this or that ritual. There is no need for them. A person should first believe in them before carrying them out. The concepts of *arbak* [deceased's spirit], *jan* [soul], *ubal* [misfortune] *soop* [good merit], and the blessing "Tengir koldosun!" "May *Tengir* protect!" should be transmitted naturally from the mother's milk.

**Mamatkerim:** *Yes, you are raising the idea of Tengirchilik. However, there are more than two thousand nations in the world, each possessing their own religion, thoughts and theories for life. Who can judge which religion is better than the other? If we praise ourselves, if the Arabs*

*praise themselves and the Christians themselves, should one use force in order to bring one idea to the others?*

I did not give the answer to this question, but Time did. Islam is fourteen hundred years old and is also losing its strength. Life itself is rejecting these religions. *Tengirchilik* has survived until today by being integrated into other religions. In other words, it has been in existence for about four thousand years because it is best suited for our life. The Kyrgyz survived because of *Tengirchilik*, and it will help them to develop in the future. For example, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, why can't all of these religions save the humans' faith? They could not. Life seems to reject their ideas, whereas, *Tengirchilik* seems to come back, because human beings are in need of it. Not because it is the religion of the Kyrgyz, but because there is need for eco-centrism and *iyman* [faith], humanity. Today there is a lot of wasting. Our ancestors used to pick up every tiny piece of bread from the ground and eat it, because if they did not, it would be *ubal* [misfortune]. We have a saying, "El karagan betim jer karap kalbasin," "I don't want my face (head), which looks up at other faces, now looking down at the ground!"<sup>386</sup> These ideas are greater concepts than the Constitution.

**Elmira:** *No matter what we say about Tengirchilik, a strong Islamic revival is taking place. Mosques and medreses [madrasahs] are being built in every village and town in Kyrgyzstan.*

Islam is not getting strong. Yes, a lot of mosques are being built, but they are empty most of the time. I said to one mullah: "You are building Allah's house, mosques, but they remain empty. You should find Allah in people's hearts." Many people do not believe in Islam. Ten or twenty people are nothing. It is not the sign of Islamic development. The majority of Kyrgyz will not go after it. They will follow *Tengirchilik*.

### How is *Tengirchilik* Viewed?

We have now seen the new national ideology that is being posed, partly in response to Islamic fundamentalism, by Kyrgyz intellectuals; but we need also to find out who is listening, who are the targets of their writings and how are these people

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<sup>386</sup> This expression has strong meaning in Kyrgyz culture. When parents teach their children, they always tell them: "El karagan betimdi, jer karatpa, balam/kizim!" "My son/daughter, do not make my face which looks up at other faces, looking down at the ground!" This means that if children do bad things they will bring a great shame to their parents and all kinsmen and those Kyrgyz who come from good tribal background do not want do bad things such as all kinds of crime, prostitution etc.

responding to the attempts to promote this new ideology? We learned that Hizb-ut-Tahrir fundamentalist group is attracting one particular segment of the population in Kyrgyzstan: unemployed, young and middle aged men and women with little or no higher education. But there are still many people with different family, economic, educational, and professional backgrounds who do not buy into any foreign religious ideas. Despite the fact that HT is still active in Kyrgyzstan and the number of its followers is increasing, majority of people in the country strongly oppose to the idea or utopia of re-establishing an Islamic caliphate, state. Among such people are most Kyrgyz intellectuals, scholars, and university professors and students majoring in Central Asian history and culture, Turcology or Kyrgyz philology. Dastan Sarygulov's Tengir-Ordo Foundation and *Tengirchilik* ideas find support among this segment of population. Unlike the HT followers, the older generation of intellectuals knows and understands the relationship between Islam and native beliefs. Like Ömüraliev and Sarıgulov, they see a great value in the nomadic cultural heritage, particularly the oral literature, which has been preserved by the elderly, poets, and epic singers for many centuries. The Kyrgyz advocates of the *Tengirchilik* have been organizing student conferences and round table discussions at universities in major cities of Kyrgyzstan. In 2003, the Foundation invited me participate at the first scholarly conference of the Youth of Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek. The title of the conference was "Uluttuk döölöt—jashtardın jan düynösündö," "[The Place] of National Heritage in the Inner World of the Youth." Many bright university students, primarily ethnic Kyrgyz, from different parts of Kyrgyzstan presented papers on Kyrgyz history, religious beliefs, language, i.e., the Old Turkic language, traditional customs, music, oral literature, traditional games, material culture, and the problems of

globalization and westernization.<sup>387</sup> The paper by an ethnic Russian female student on “On traditional Kyrgyz Handicraft” won the best paper award. On the opening day of the Conference, together with other distinguished intellectuals and writers, I was also asked to talk about the Kyrgyz language and culture taught in the United States. I also served as one of the “judges” to evaluate students’ presentations. The papers were quite rich in content, but not “scholarly” in terms of the approach and methodology. All students spoke passionately and showed genuine concern for the current status of Kyrgyz language and culture and proposed some suggestions how to preserve and develop national heritage and still be able to advance in the age of globalization. In other words, *Tengirchilik* is not a narrow religious concept, but rather a broad philosophical worldview, which has become an integral part of everyday life among the Altaic Turks, including the Kyrgyz. However, Kyrgyz Muslim clergy, especially those who foster fundamentalist Islamic ideas, do not understand or do not even want to understand the concept of *Tengirchilik*, because Islam does not recognize any other deity except Allah. Through the newspaper *Islam madaniyatī* [Islamic Culture], local Muslim clergy try to educate modern Kyrgyz about “real Islam.” In his controversial article titled “How to Chose a Religion?”<sup>388</sup> Abdulaziz ibn Abdulkerim, local Muslim scholar, mocks the idea of *Tengirchilik*:

*Tengirism*. First of all, they themselves do not know when it came into existence, what kind of prophet brought it, nor how to save and educate people according to *tengirism*. Its followers are spreading this religion without even knowing what is sinful and good for their god.

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<sup>387</sup> *Uluttuk döölöt—jasgtardın jan düynösündö*. Kırğızstan jashtarınin birinchi ilimiy jüyüninın emgekterinin jüynagı (National Heritage in the Inner World of the Youth. Collection of Papers of the First Scholarly Conference of the Youth of Kyrgyzstan). Bishkek: Tengir-Ordo Foundation, 2003.

<sup>388</sup> Abdulaziz ibn Abdulkerim, “Dindi kanday tandoo kerek?” (How Should One choose the Religion?) *Islam Madaniyatı* (Islamic Culture), Bishkek, February 2, 2002.

Sometimes they call *tengir* the sky, sometimes, high mountains, sometimes Manas, and sometimes God himself.

A religion such as Tengir is beneficial for thieves, criminals, bribers, and for other rotten people, because it does not require any responsibility for their wrongdoings.

How can *arbaks*, [spirits] persecute a briber or liar? Here is an examples of the weakness of *tengirism*: several years ago, when the secret services could not catch Jaysangbayev, one of the main leaders said: "I will leave him to the spirit of Manas!" What?! Do you think the spirits of our ancestors will catch the criminal?!

Also, *Tengirism* is good for lazy and irresponsible people. They do not have to wash themselves, get up for morning prayer, visit the mosques or other objects of worship; in other words they do not have to do anything. This suits many people, who want to do anything they want to and no one forbids their actions. The *Tengirists* cannot prove where the ideas of morality come from. There is no doubt that our ancestors possessed vast numbers of human moral qualities. However, where in *Tengirism* does one find a system, rules, words and expressions which exist in other big religions, such as *akıykat* [justice], *aram* [forbidden], *adal* [permitted], *sabır* [tolerance], *ıyman* [faith], and so on.

The *Tengirists* foster ten commandments, which they themselves do not know; which things are first and which are secondary; they do not know how and by what means to stop crime among the people. All these attest to the fact that it is an archaic thing which has gone from the line of religion, similar to an old car with an old engine and parts which can only be used for a museum.

Yes, dear gentlemen, leave this religion for history and the museum.<sup>389</sup>

Advocates of *Tengirchilik* are very well aware of their ideas' perception among the Muslim religious community. They simply ignore their opinions. So far, there seems to be no room for the two groups to accept each other's ideas.

Meantime, Kyrgyz intellectuals continue their search for a national ideology, which would be based on Kyrgyz traditional democratic values inherited from their nomadic past. According to one of the prominent Kyrgyz scholar A. Akmatalliev, professor and the Rector of the Narın State University, northern Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan must have a national ideology. He states that it would be ideal if the national ideology was created by

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<sup>389</sup> Abdulaziz ibn Abdukerim, "Kak vybirat' religiuyu?" (How To Chose a Religion?), in newspaper *Islam madaniyati*, February 2, 2002.

the civil society and was adopted or spread naturally among the people. However, “at this historical period of transformation,” notes Akmatyaliyev, “the state should take the initiative of proposing the ideology” for the people. He believes that the country will not develop without a system of values, which would in turn bring the society into chaos. Like many Kyrgyz intellectuals, he opposes the western model of democracy, which, “under the guise of liberalism” or ideas of human rights, is destroying traditional local values. He further notes that for fifteen years the Kyrgyz was not able to choose their own way of socio-economic development and this resulted in confusion and chaos. As examples, he gives the controversial nature of national holidays, which are being celebrated in Kyrgyzstan. They are:

- a) Communist holidays: March 8 (International Women’s Day), February 23 (Military Day) May 1 (International Workers’ Day) May 9 (Victory Day, WWII) and November 7 (1917 October Revolution Day)
- b) Religious holidays: Kurman Ait (Festival of Sacrifice), Orozo Ait (Feast after the holy month of Ramadan), Christmas (Christian)
- c) Independence Day: August 31, Constitution Day: May 5;
- d) Eastern/Persian culture: March 21, Nooruz (New Year)
- e) Western culture: December 31 (New Year) and Christmas

Akmatyaliyev is right that these holidays contradict each other. It is noted that the Russians in Russia and Uzbeks in Uzbekistan constitute the main ethnic group of the country. And since the Kyrgyz are the titular nation in Kyrgyzstan, the country’s ideology should be based on the values of Kyrgyz people. This is the first time that the Kyrgyz was able to achieve their independence, notes the author, and “they have a great responsibility to preserve their statehood. Secondly, the Kyrgyz are in a vulnerable position in terms of its political due to migration, gene pool, demographic inclination.”

In sum, both groups, secular minded intellectuals and Muslim clergy, are concerned about the socio-economic problems that the country is facing since the Soviet collapse. Both are holding strongly to their own principles and beliefs, which are exclusive in nature, especially Islam. Many ordinary people are just going with the flow of time and changes, but advocates of *Tengirchilik* such as Ömüraliev believe that “for now most Kyrgyz are not ready to embrace the idea of *Tengirchilik*, but the “future generations will definitely return to this issue.”<sup>390</sup>

## Conclusion

My research finding also showed that this ancient worldview or religion, whatever it maybe called, did not survive as a separate religious dogma or teaching written in holy books, but turned into people’s lifestyle. For this reason, one hesitates to call it a “world religion” which is something that has a separate or independent existence. The fact that there is no Turkic native word for “religion” is a proof for that. Today all Turkic peoples use the Arabic word “din” for religion. Devin DeWeese makes an excellent point in regard to this issue:

This absence of indigenous terminology is, however, hardly a sign that conceptions and practices immediately recognizable as “religious” are unimportant or poorly developed among such peoples; on the contrary, it is most often a sign that these “religious” conceptions and practices are so intimately linked with all aspects of life—that is, with all aspects of what being human is considered by those peoples to mean—that life is inconceivable without them, leaving no rationale for a separate taxonomy devoted to “religion” as such.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> *Tengirchilik*, p. 13.

<sup>391</sup> DeWeese, Devin. *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde. Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, p. 28.

However, the Central Asian intellectuals seemed to have found a native term to characterize the native/pre-Islamic religious worldview of the Turkic peoples: *Tengirchilik*. The advocates of *Tengirchilik* are not trying to invent a new religion, but rather trying to systematize those existing “religious conceptions” and values, which are difficult to separate from everyday life, human relationships and activities. Or as Ömüraliev stated: “Now, when you look at our literature, songs, proverbs, and customs, they all seem to stand separately. However, when you look deeper, there is a big stem, which unites them all. All of these things seem to circle around that stem. As soon as they hold on to that stem, they make up a whole system. That stem is *Tengirchilik*.”<sup>392</sup> In other words, they only created the term “Tengirchilik” out of the ancient Turkic word “Tängri” (Sky, God), not its teachings and values.

The concept of *Tengirchilik* grew as a response to the growing influence of foreign religious ideas such as Islam and Christianity, which try to undermine the value of local beliefs and practices. In other words, Kyrgyz intellectuals are counteracting against the wrong assumption that the Kyrgyz did not have set of religious beliefs or “institutionalized” religious practices and rules such as in Islam and Christianity. Many people would agree with Ömüraliev who notes, today the process of Arabization is taking place under the disguise of Islam, especially when it comes to naming new born babies. For example, in my Ogotur clan’s genealogy booklet, all the personal male names up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century were exclusively of Kyrgyz/Turkic origin. Later, with the adoption of Islam, it became a tradition to ask a mullah to name a child. And they usually gave them Muslim, i.e., Arabic names. My own great grandfather’s name is Köchümkul

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<sup>392</sup> Excerpt from the interview with Choyun Ömüraliev used in this Chapter.



(Kyrgyz name) and grandfather's name is Kochkorbay (Kyrgyz name), but my father's is Mamatkerim, which is a Kyrgyz pronunciation of Muhammad Karim (Holy). His younger brother who was born after him was named Abdikerim, which is pronounced as Abdu(l) Karim (Holy) in Arabic. Both of their names were given by an Uzbek mullah, because my grandparents were living in Uzbekistan at that time. It became a common practice among the Kyrgyz for example to name their children Jumabay (male name), Jumagül or Jumakan for girls if they are born on Friday (Juma), which is considered a holy day. The Kyrgyz/Turkic *bay* or *bek* which are attached to the end of male personal names were also replaced with Ali. So, Turgunbay/Turgunbek became Turgunali, Ömürbay/Ömürbek became Ömüralī, Mīrzabay/Mīrzabek became Mīrzalī. Now, all Kyrgyz who joined HT, including my classmates, are naming their sons and daughters with names from the Quran such as Abu Bakr, Abu Talib, Ismail, Abdul Aziz, etc.

As Karamanulī notes correctly the major difference of *Tengirchilik* from other world or prophetic religions is that there is “no prophet or saint and no holy book containing God’s words, because it has been transmitted from generation to the other in the form of traditional customs and social values.”<sup>393</sup> Tengir (God) is the “Great Force” which treats everybody equal and shows compassion and care to everyone equally. Unlike other scripture religions, “it is not a guard (karaul) who controls your each step and movement.”<sup>394</sup> Like Sarīgulov, Karamanulī also pointed out, that in the Tengir worldview there are no concepts of the other world, Judgment Day, Heaven and Hell.<sup>395</sup> It is the worldview of all the Turkic peoples starting from the Scythians (Sak), Huns, and

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<sup>393</sup> Karamanulī, pp. 14-15.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>395</sup> *Op.cit.*

various Turkic tribes in the Turkic khanates, who from ancient times worshipped Tengir (Sky) as God, venerated *arbak*, (the spirit of a deceased ancestor, parents, or well-known person) and considered Sky (Kök/Asman) as their Mother, Earth (Jer) as their Father.<sup>396</sup>

It is also important to note that the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz highly valued the power of a well spoken *Söz* (Word). Ömüräliev tells an interesting story in his book about the value of a well-spoken or wise word. The story's short summary is as follows: In the past, Kyrgyz leaders and wise men got together in a summer pasture where they engaged in a conversation about what is eternal and what is not eternal in this world. Some young men said that the mountains and rocks are eternal, they do not die. Then an *oluya* [saint] among them named Sart ake said: "A mullah's [learned man's] letter does not die; a wise man's words and name do not die, everything other than these two dies." The other men asked Sart ake to explain how the mountains and the earth are not eternal. He said: "O.K. Listen carefully with your two ears. Where there is growth/life there is death." Then he elaborated his point in wise poetic words:

Askar toonun ölgönü--  
 Bashın munar chalganı.  
 Asmanda bulut ölgönü--  
 Asha albay toonu kalganı.  
 Ay menen Kündün ölgönü--  
 Engkeyip barıp batkanı.  
 Aydın bettin ölgönü--  
 Muz bolup tashtay katkanı.  
 Kara Jerdin ölgönü--  
 Kar astında kalganı.  
 Ölbögöndö emne ölböyt?  
 Moldonun jazgan kati ölböyt da,  
 Jakshının sözü, atı ölböyt.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., pp. 265-267.

The mighty mountain dies  
 When gloom covers its peak.  
 The cloud in the sky dies  
 When it can't cross over the mountains.  
 The Moon and the Sun die  
 When they settle down.  
 The moon-like face dies  
 When it freezes like rock.  
 The Black Earth dies  
 Beneath heavy snow.  
 What doesn't die then?  
 A learned man's writing doesn't die,  
 A wise man's word and name don't die.

Like many Kyrgyz intellectuals, I also got to experience the nomadic life of my ancestors and learned a great wisdom expressed in the oral tradition. And I am convinced to say that oral tradition is a more appropriate and just as legitimate expression of religiosity/ideology among the Kyrgyz.

As has been mentioned earlier, national ideologies emerge at particular historical times of transformation. Modern Kyrgyz are not alone in this nation building process; their experience of national awakening is shared with other nation states of post-colonial or post-Communist period such as Eastern Europeans and with some of the minority peoples of China such as the Yi. Native intellectuals genuinely think that it is their sacred duty or mission, as educated and learned men and women of their respected societies, to preserve and promote the ancient cultural heritage of their people. In a way, it is a struggle of smaller nations and minority peoples to survive through the current age of globalization and modernization or within superpower hegemonies without losing the essence of their identity and language. In his letter that he wrote to me when I was

studying in America, my Kyrgyz Professor Sulayman Kayipov stated: “it is difficult to be a member of a small country like Kyrgyzstan.”

## Summary

The findings of this dissertation work are mainly based on the eighteen months of ethnographic research that I conducted in my hometown Kizil-Jar (formerly known as Kizil-Jar *sovkhos*, state farm) during the years 2002-2003. However, as a native scholar and representative of Kyrgyz [nomadic] society and culture, I also made use of my knowledge and personal experiences acquired in my early childhood and youth. As I have noted, I grew up in a family of nomadic herders and interacted with both sides of my parents' tribesmen (Ogotur and Aginay) who have practiced pastoral nomadism for many centuries. My unique and rich childhood experience of nomadic life and culture played an important role in forming of my identity. This close attachment to Kyrgyz traditional values, customs, and the art of oral creativity is definitely reflected in my scholarly approach to and treatment of Kyrgyz nomadic heritage and its significance in the formation of Kyrgyz national identity and the future development of ideology as an independent nation state.

My thesis deals with three major issues, which have current significance in contemporary Central Asia: Kyrgyz (and Kazakh) nomadic customs, Islamic revival, and the emergence of a new national ideology, *Tengirchilik*.

Scholars have made general comparative studies of historical nomadic-sedentary interaction between various Turco-Mongol tribal confederations and sedentary societies such as China, Persia, and Russia. However, they have paid less attention to this interaction's legacy in shaping modern ethnic/national identities and ethno-cultural boundaries. Therefore, as a classical example of nomad-sedentary interaction in Central Asia, I chose to examine the dynamics of identity formation between the two ethnic

groups, the formerly nomadic Kyrgyz and the sedentary Uzbeks. In order to understand what it means to be a Kyrgyz for the Kyrgyz and Uzbek for the Uzbeks, it was important to put the issue in historical context of nomadic-sedentary interaction.

Instead of dismissing some of the popular socio-cultural stereotypes created by the nomadic Kyrgyz (and Kazakhs) about the sedentary Uzbeks, historically known as Sarts, I tried to examine the dynamics of their identity formation and conditions that created those ethno-cultural boundaries. One of the best examples, which tell us about the formation of early nomadic identity as opposed to the sedentary identity, is the 8<sup>th</sup> century Kültegin Inscription left by the nomadic Turks themselves. As the earliest native written source, the Inscription contains very interesting and valuable material about the Turkic and Chinese interaction and the native worldview of the Turkic peoples, including the Kyrgyz, before the adoption and influence of other religions such as Islam.

Almost all the cultural distinctions between the two groups--such as Kyrgyz tribal identity vs. Uzbeks regional identity, Kyrgyz character or mentality vs. that of the Uzbeks, food and hospitality, women's roles and different degrees of Islamic practice--grew out of ecological boundaries or "structural oppositions." A number of popular sayings among the Kyrgyz (and Kazakhs) about the Uzbeks' (Sarts') mentality, character, and hospitality contain interesting and valuable information that helps us to understand what kind of human virtues and religious beliefs were valued in Central Asian nomadic society and why.

The islamization of Central Asian nomadic peoples did not occur in one century; it was a long, gradual process. It was mainly Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, which was welcomed in Central Asia, especially by the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs. One of

the reasons that Sufism was quite popular is that it was tolerant of the local un-Islamic beliefs and practices. Central Asians developed a distinct form of *musulmanchilik*, or Muslimness by assimilating some of the main Islamic and Sufi beliefs and practices with their pre-Islamic worldview. The latter, which, until very recently, had been incorrectly called “shamanism,” seems to have found a new and proper name, *Tengirchilik*, coined by Central Asian native scholars and intellectuals. The coexistence of Islamic/Sufi and *Tengirchilik* beliefs and practices has been one of the reasons for calling the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz “nominal Muslims.” The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are not likely to be offended if they are called nominal Muslims, for they are themselves aware of the fact that they do not observe Islam as strictly as in other Muslim countries. Some of the common Islamic practices can be seen at those “formal” rituals and ceremonies such as rites of passage, (e.g., circumcision, marriage, funeral rites, etc.). In Islamic culture, the person should be buried within twenty-four hours after his/her death, but the Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz do not obey this rule. They at least keep the body one day, in some cases for two days until close family members arrive. Also, *sharia* forbids the slaughtering of any animal for a funeral, but among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz this rule is totally ignored. It is mandatory to slaughter a horse at a funeral among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz, whereas the Uzbeks do not kill any animal and bury their deceased within twenty four hours. Such “violations” of Islamic *sharia* can be explained by the earlier stated theory, i.e., that the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz did not adopt Islam as it was, but “filtered new, external elements through their own cultural norms and aspirations.”<sup>398</sup> In other words, many “suitable” Islamic practices, which did not contradict with their local traditional values, were easily

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<sup>398</sup> See Chapter 4, p. 151.

adopted and practiced. The Kyrgyz and Kazakh “nomadic mentality” cannot obey the dogmatic or strict religious rules that orthodox Islam requires from its sedentary believers. The historical nomadic life and nomad-sedentary interaction are gone, but their legacies continue to influence the everyday interaction between the modern Kyrgyz and Uzbek societies. The reason for that, as the advocates of *Tengirchilik* also point out, is their pre-Islamic worldview and values that “have deeply penetrated into the blood” of the Kazaks and Kyrgyz, who turned their religious beliefs and values into their lifestyle. As the Kyrgyz intellectuals themselves admit, they are not inventing a new religion, which they call *Tengirchilik*, but, as educators and intellectuals, are reminding their people of their past heritage. Or as the title of one of Dastan Sarıgulov’s small publications states, intellectuals believe that the “Ignorance of the Descendants Will Destroy the Future and Erase the Past.”

In sum, Central Asian Islam or Muslimness among the formerly nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz should be understood within the combination of two religious contexts, namely the Islamic and the pre-Islamic, or indigenous. We cannot deny the role and significance of either of them if we are to give an accurate view of their traditional and religious values. The current Central and Inner Asian traditional religion is composed of “the adaptations of home grown and ‘imported’ religious concepts and patterns that had been assimilated as its own by a particular community at a particular time, regardless of its ‘origin’ as a cultural historian might insist upon. Islam itself eventually became part of that ‘indigenous’ tradition just as earlier ‘foreign’ elements had.”<sup>399</sup> Moreover, as Privratsky notes, what really matters is the “local contextualizations” of Islam among the

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<sup>399</sup> DeWeese, p. 29.



Kazakhs and “other peoples like them with adequate means of laying hold of the Muslim life even where its orthopractic and legal tradition is weakly understood, inconvenient, or perceived as foreign.”<sup>400</sup>

The main argument of this thesis is that it was due to their nomadic life and ancient religious worldview that the Kyrgyz (and Kazakhs) did not and could not fully adopt Islam, which is mostly suitable for sedentary societies and cultures. It is true that all Kyrgyz, except for a few herding families, lived a sedentary life during the Soviet period for more than seventy years. However, the Islamization process among the nomadic Kyrgyz ceased after the Soviets occupied Central Asia. Due to strong anti-Islamic and anti-“shamanic” campaigns and the atheist ideology of the Communist Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz estranged themselves from some of the formal Islamic practices and values, which they had already adopted before the Soviet occupation. Most of their pre-Islamic religious practices and values, which also suffered from Soviet anti-religious propaganda, had been Islamized by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, many ordinary people do not and cannot well distinguish between Islamic and pre-Islamic practices and beliefs.

Now, after their independence, the Kyrgyz continue to lead a sedentary life, which they had adopted in the early Soviet period. The historical process of Islamization among nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, which had ceased after the Soviet establishment, is resuming again. Both fundamentalist Islamic groups, such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and official Orthodox (Sunni) Islam, are fighting against native/nomadic practices and beliefs among many other aspects of secular life in Kyrgyzstan.

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<sup>400</sup> Privratsky, p. 243.

There is also the homegrown intellectual movement, *Tengirchilik*, promoted by native scholars and intellectuals, who want their people to progress by fostering their ancestral worldview. As scholars and anthropologists in the field of humanities, we must acknowledge some of the legitimate views of native scholars and intellectuals and support them in their effort to preserve certain traditions and values from which the modern world can greatly benefit. As Sarigulov mentioned, the value or uniqueness of the *Tengirchilik* worldview is that it puts Nature above everything, including human beings. Nature and Its forces should be considered sacred because they function like a prophet who brings the message of *Tengir*, God, *Allah*, *Quday*, etc. Respecting and preserving Nature by considering that everything in It has a soul must be a universal belief. Like many other international environmentalist organizations, the advocates of *Tengirchilik* want to teach people to respect and preserve Nature. They take a spiritual approach to tell or warn people that Nature or Mother Earth can and will no longer tolerate humans' exploitation of Her natural resources and other countless environmental problems caused by humans. Like all the other creatures on the Earth, human life will continue to depend on Nature. Therefore, there is a possible future connection between *Tengirchilik* and international environmentalism.

The nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs did not practice writing and thus did not leave any written records about their customs and social life in general. However, they developed a unique verbal art, which allowed them to preserve major socio-cultural and historical events in oral form and pass them from one generation to the next, each time renewing and adapting them to the conditions of their changing life and times. Thus, the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz stored and celebrated their socio-cultural history in oral

forms, e.g., epic poetry, folktales, proverbs, and *aytış* singing contests between *akıns*, or improvising oral poets. As a primary and native source, epic songs in particular contain rich and first-hand information about people's religious beliefs, socio-cultural values, and customs, including funeral rites. The bearers and transmitters of this oral tradition were the wise and eloquent members of the society such as elders, poets, epic singers, storytellers, and healers/shamans, who were living books.

In his very recent book titled *Jilga bergis jarım kün*<sup>401</sup> (A Half Day Which Cannot be Exchanged for a Year), Sulayman Kayıpov, an expert on Kyrgyz oral tradition, writes like many other Kyrgyz intellectuals his true feelings about the current and future state and fate of Kyrgyz national heritage and identity. He truly burns (*küy-*) and aches (*sızda-*) inside and asks: "If I, who was born as a Kyrgyz, who grew up as a Kyrgyz, and who will die as a Kyrgyz, does not ache [care], who will? If I and others like me do not burn [care], who will burn [care] for the Kyrgyz, please tell me, my brother!"<sup>402</sup> He continues: "If we do not care, the spirits of our ancestors won't leave us alone. If we do not care, our children will not care either."<sup>403</sup> As a native scholar and member of a small nation like the Kyrgyz, I also strongly believe that the loss of our traditional customs and native language equates to the loss of the Kyrgyz nation and their identity. As many Kyrgyz believe, it was not Islam or Muslimness that preserved the Kyrgyz for many centuries as one people or ethnic group, but it was rather their distinctive traditional

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<sup>401</sup> Kayıpov, Sulayman. *Jilga bergis jarım kün* (A Half Day Which Cannot be Exchanged for a Year). Bishkek, 2006.

<sup>402</sup> The sentence in Kyrgyz reads: ". . . *kirgiz bolup törölgön, kirgiz bolup jetilgen, kirgiz boydon ölüügö bel baylagan, men sizdabay kim sizdayt; men jana men sinduular küybösö, bul kirgizga kim küyöt, aytchi, tuugan!*" Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>403</sup> Op.cit.

customs and values, and the art of oral creativity all, of which stemmed from their nomadic lifestyle.

As the Central Asian saying states *Aalim boluu ongoy, adam boluu kiyin*, “It is easy to become a scholar, but it is difficult to become a good human being,” many people can be smart by reading books, writing scholarly works, and inventing new sociocultural theories, but it is more important for scholars to be of good use for the society, to interact with people of all backgrounds and help them to bridge their traditional values and life with those of the modern world. We must educate new generation(s) of people who will be able to live according to their own national/traditional values, and yet can live peacefully with their neighbors by showing tolerance for cultural and religious diversity.

Finally, it is impossible to achieve or find absolute truth about anything. One time, after our interesting discussion of the above religious debates between Islamic and Kyrgyz nomadic traditions, my father Mamatkerim said: “No one knows the absolute truth about this world and next world. Do you know what Omar Hayam wrote?” And he recited in Uzbek from his memory the following four lines from Hayam translated into Uzbek by an Uzbek poet:

Biz kelib ketguchi tu’garak jahon,  
Na boshi malimu, na ohiri ayon,  
Gar su’rsalar, hech kim aytib berolmas,  
Biz qaydan keldig-u, keturmiz qayon.

Lit:

This round earth into which we come and from which we depart,  
No one knows how it came into existence and how it will end,  
If someone asks, no one can answer  
Where we came from and where we will go [after we die].<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> The standard 19<sup>th</sup> century English translation by Edward Fitzgerald is as follows:  
“Into this Universe, and Why not knowing,  
Nor Whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing;

However, a majority of ordinary people try to make sense of their life and the world in which they live by having meaningful interactions with each other. These interactions and communal and national identities are built around certain religious beliefs, traditional values, and customs, which make up “Culture.” Culture is not frozen in time of course; it goes through the processes of renewal or/and change during historical periods of transition. It is usually during those transition periods, such as modernization, westernization, and globalization that people, mainly intellectuals, turn to traditional values of their national heritage to solve the socio-cultural problems that their societies face. Moreover, this national and cultural self-protection is arising in places like Kyrgyzstan because other major prophetic religions such as Islam and Christianity, especially their fundamentalist or fanatic believers, are fighting or competing with each other over prospective converts. Peoples and cultures which are religiously characterized as “pagan” also believe in the existence of one God, but they communicate with God by developing and practicing different sets of rituals and customs due to various ecological, environmental, and socio-economic factors. Privratsky, indeed, does a very good job in convincing his readers to believe in his theory of collective memory applied to Kazakh religion. It is to be noticed, that as a pious Christian missionary and scholar, he does see the value of any religious behaviors and rituals that come from non-monotheist or pagan religions. He states: “. . . in the collective memory of the Kazaks it is *not* these archaic

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And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,  
I know not Whither, willy-nilly blowing.”

(*The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam* by Edward Fitzgerald. Hypertext Meanings and Commentaries from the Encyclopedia of the Self by Mark Zimmerman. URL: [www.selfknowledge.com](http://www.selfknowledge.com))

traditions [i.e., native; pre-Islamic or un-Islamic] but “our Muslimness,” the Muslimness of our ancestors that requires us to remember them with the Quran and a sacred meal. Inner Asian religious values have been conceptually and affectively accommodated to Islam in a thoroughgoing way.”<sup>405</sup> Due to his Christian background, he finds comfort in the idea that Kazakhs are not pagans, but Muslims who share many common religious values with Christians. However, I and other Kyrgyz intellectuals may be criticized by Privratsky and others alike for doing the same thing. As learned native scholars, we cannot stand aside and allow other scriptural religions to condemn our traditional values and customs. It is difficult to prove that nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz embraced Islam voluntarily and overnight. Islamization was achieved after many centuries of resistance. Yes, today, in their “collective memory,” most Kyrgyz and Kazakhs consider themselves and their ancestors Muslim from time immemorial. This is because the majority of people do not know the political history of Islam, or how it spread. Their ancestors did voluntarily not forget their native beliefs and choose Islam over their native religious beliefs. In the same way that Christianity was brutally imposed on Native Americans, Islam was not tolerant of nomadic religious values and practices, and Islamization was achieved through conquest and organized missionary works. The historical process of Islamization erased most of the existing native “collective memory” and the second phase of that process is taking place now. The Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz do remember their pre-Islamic traditional values and religious practices. What they don't remember is where those values came from. Their ancient religious beliefs and traditional values were not written in holy books such as Quran, Bible, and Torah, but had turned into their lifestyle.

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<sup>405</sup> Privratsky, p. 149.

Unlike the ordinary people, native scholars and intellectuals are aware of this aspect of their religious worldview and values. Therefore, as educated and knowledgeable men and women in their society, they feel obligated to teach their people the values of their native customs and traditions, because, in my opinion, only pride and respect for one's native culture can prevent the loss of one's native language and ethno-national identity.

Glossary<sup>406</sup>

- aba* - paternal uncle, i.e., older brother of one's father.
- agay* - a respected term of address used by students for their male teachers.
- aginay* - name of a clan within the Saruu tribe.
- ak chölmök* - Kyrgyz traditional game played under the moonlight on a green summer pasture.
- ak kiydi* - lit.: "dressed in white;" referring to the tradition of replacing the black colored dress of women in mourning, especially widows, with white or bright colored dresses and scarfs.
- ak örgöö* - a large size yurt with white felt coverings. Historically, these kind of yurts were mostly owned by khans and tribal leaders.
- akin* - oral improvising poet; *tökmö akin*-master oral poet.
- aksakal* - "white bearded man," a term of address for a respected elderly man.
- Aksi* - a region in the Jalal-Abad province of southern Kyrgyzstan.
- ala dopu* - round shaped cap made from cotton worn by Uzbek men.
- apa* - mother.
- apchi* - a kinship term for an older sister in the Aksı and Talas dialects of Kyrgyzstan.
- aqıyda* - (Ar.) religious creed
- arbak* - (Ar. ) ancestral spirit; spirit of the deceased.
- ash* - a memorial feast offered within a year after the death of a person. *Ash* is an elaborate feast where horses and sheep are killed in honor of guests who come to pay tribute to the deceased. Traditional horse races and other games are organized by the host who gives prizes in livestock for the winners.
- ash/paloo* - pilaf made with beef/lamb, carrots, and rice.
- ashkana* - cafeteria.
- ashar* - work done by volunteers' help.
- ashpozchu* - [pilaf] cook.
- at bayge* - traditional long distance horse race. Horses four years and older participate in this particular race.
- ata konush* - ancestral nomadic camp.
- ata meken* - fatherland.
- avtolavka* (Rus.) - truck store which brought goods to villages during the Soviet period.
- ayıl ökmötü* - village government introduced in Kyrgyzstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- ayran* - sour curdled milk; yogurt.
- aytış/laytıs* (Kz.)- traditional singing contest between two poets who challenge each other in improvising poems with initial alliteration and end rhyme, characteristic of Kyrgyz and Kazakh oral poetry.
- aza kütüüchülör* - mourners.
- bakshı* - healer, shaman, fortune teller.
- barishi* (Mong.) - bone-setter among the Daur Mongols.

<sup>406</sup> All italicized terms are Kyrgyz unless indicated. Kazakh terms are similar to Kyrgyz. Pr.=Persian; Ar.=Arabic; Rus.=Russian; Kz.=Kazakh; Uz.=Uzbek; Mong.=Mongol.



- bariyachi* (Mong.)- midwife among the Daur Mongols.
- bata* - (Ar. *fatiha*) the first *surah* of Qur'an; Among the Central Asians it refers to the blessing of elders and parents; the expression *bataga baruu* means to visit the family of a deceased and recite the Qur'an in his/her memory.
- bayge*, a long distance horse race involving three groups of horses according to their age.
- bayterek* - "World Tree," symbolizing abundance and prosperity in life in Turco-Mongol mythology.
- bedik* – specific type of Kazakh traditional songs sung to cure the sick.
- besh barmak* - lit.: "five fingers;" a traditional dish of noodles mixed with meat cut into small pieces and eaten by hand.
- beshik toy/jeentek toy* - cradle/nephew/niece feast. In Central Asia traditionally a newborn baby's maternal grandmother brings a new cradle with all the decorations and covers. The maternal grandparents of the baby offer a sheep in honor of the guests.
- beyshembilik* - the first memorial feast for the dead held on the Thursday following the death.
- bid'ah* - (Ar.) idolatrous/religious innovations.
- bilerman* - one who knows, wise man.
- Bilge Qagan - ruler of the Turk Empire which existed between 552-744 A.D in Inner Asia.
- biy* - judge among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.
- boz üy*- lit.: "gray house;" yurt, also known as *kirgiz üy*.
- boorsok* - traditional fried bread cut in small pieces.
- bölök östü* - one who is raised outside of his/her extended family.
- chaban* - shepherd.
- chabatı* - very thin and flat bread baked on a cast iron cauldron.
- chaykhana* - teahouse.
- chaykoochu* - One sold goods illegally during the Soviet period; also known as *spekulyant*, speculator in Russian.
- chechen* - eloquent person or orator.
- chillayasin* – (Pr. "chilla" i.e., "forty") and "Ya-Sin" are the initial letters of one of the main *surahs* of the Qur'an.
- chong* - big; big shot.
- chong apa* - paternal aunt, older sister of one's father.
- chong ata* - paternal grandfather.
- dastans* - traditional long poems.
- dastorkon* - tablecloth covered with various foods, sweets, and fruit.
- dawat* (Ar. *daw'a*), religious preaching in Islam.
- dawatchi* – Muslim preacher, missionary.
- diykan charba* - farmers' cooperative
- dombra* - two-stringed Kazakh traditional instrument.
- dubana* - Muslim beggar.
- dzikr* - (Pr.) Sufi religious practice in which dervishes whirl to remember and to be one with God; *dzikr* is also a practice where the name of God (prases from the Quran) are recited over a length of time).

- elechek* - head dress worn traditionally by Kyrgyz married and elderly women
- enchi* - a traditional nomadic custom of giving share(s) in livestock to children by their parents and also to newly born grandchildren by their maternal grandparents.
- epchi jak* - the women's side in the yurt to the right of the entrance.
- er engish-* wrestling contest between men on horseback.
- er jak* - the men's side in the yurt to the left of the entrance.
- eshen* - (Pr. ishan, term of respect), a Sufi leader.
- fatwa* - (Ar.) Muslim religious decree.
- galstuk* - (Rus.) red scarf worn by pioneers during the Soviet period.
- Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islamiyya* - (Ar.) Party of Islamic Liberation.
- Ichkilik* - one of the main three tribes in Kyrgyzstan.
- iftar* - breaking of the fast during the holy month of Ramadan.
- imam* - Muslim religious clergy.
- ishtan* - traditional loose pants made from cotton or silk. It is traditionally worn by Uzbek women in summer time at home and on the street, whereas many Kyrgyz women in southern Kyrgyzstan wear it at home.
- ilyaak* - one who cries a lot, mostly referred to a baby.
- iyman* - faith; humanity, good behavior, honesty.
- Jadid* - a reformist; one belonging to the reformist movement which developed in Tsarist Central Asia towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- janaza* - Muslim funerary prayer recited right before the deceased's body is taken out for its final place.
- jardamchi* - lit.: "helpers," term used for cotton pickers in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet period
- jaychi* - (Mong. yaychi) "rain maker" among Mongols and Turks.
- jayloo* - summer pasture.
- jazgich akindar/zamanachi akindar* – poets who wrote and composed religious poetry about the changing times during the Russian occupation of Central Asia.
- jeen* - children of a man's sisters.
- jele* - a long rope secured into the ground at the two ends. It is used to tie the foals to prevent from suckling their mothers.
- jeti nan/chelpek* - lit.: "seven breads;" traditional offering of fried pastries to the spirits of the deceased relatives and ancestors;
- jetilik* - a memorial feast for the deceased offered seven days after the death.
- jildik* - one-year memorial feast.
- jorgo bayge* - trotter race.
- juma namaz* - Friday prayer.
- Juma qutbasi* - (Friday Sermon) 30 minute TV program on Kyrgyz National TV about Islam and its teachings.
- kabar-* (Ar. *qabar*,) news; *suuk kabar*, lit.: cold news, i.e., news about someone's death.
- kabarchi* - messenger.
- kalender-* dervish-like saint.
- kaling* - bride price given in livestock.
- kalpak-* Kyrgyz traditional hat worn by men. It is made from white felt.
- kapir* - (Ar. qufr) non-believer, infidel.

*kapshıt* - the place where two *tuurduks* (felt coverings) of the yurt (there are four separate pieces of felt coverings) join.

*kara kiyüü* - wearing of black, mourning clothes.

*kayın aga* - traditional term used for one's husband's older brother.

*kayın eje* - traditional term used for one's husband's older sister.

*kayın ini* - traditional term used for one's husband's younger brother.

*kayın jurt* - relatives/kinsmen of the wife or the husband.

*kaymak* - fresh cream.

*kazal* - (Pr. ghazal) poetic genre used by literate Kyrgyz poets of the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

*kazan* - cast iron cauldron.

*kazyiat* - Muslim religious administration.

*kırkı* - fortieth day memorial feast for the deceased.

*kelin* - new bride, daughter in-law.

*kereez* - final words spoken of a dying person.

*kerege* - the collapsible side walls of the yurt.

*kımkap* - type of silk.

*kıştoo* - winter camping ground of nomads.

*kiyanchi* - (Mong.) sorcerer among the Daur Mongols.

*kiyit* - gift of clothes exchanged during traditional feasts such as weddings and memorial feasts.

*kiyiz* - felts made from sheep wool.

*kız kuumay* - traditional game played on horse back: a young man chases a young girl on horse back.

*Kıdır/Kızır* - (Ar. *Al-Khidr* "Green One") servant of God and companion of the Prophet Musa/Moses; in Central Asia he is a holy wise man who bestows fortune and blessing to special people.

*klasskom* - (Rus.) class leader in middle school.

*kochevnik* - (Rus.) term used for a nomad; *kochevoi* for "nomadic."

*kojo/khoja* - people who claim descentance from the Prophet Muhammad and his son-in-law Ali.

*kojoyun* - master, term used for husbands among Uzbeks.

*komersant* - (Rus.) one who buys goods cheaper and sells them for a more expensive.

*Komsomol* - (Rus.) Committee of Soviet Youth.

*komuz* - Kyrgyz traditional instrument.

*kontor(a)* - (Rus.) the main administrative building where the director of state farm or collective farm worked.

*koroo* - coral for animals.

*koshok/joktoo* - song of lament sung by women about a deceased.

*koy kırkım* - shearing sheep's wool.

*köchmön* - nomad.

*kımız* - fermented mare's milk.

*kuda* - a traditional term of address between two father-in-laws

*kudagıy* - a traditional term of address between two mother-in-laws.

*kudachılık* - first traditional meeting of the in-laws before the wedding.

- kuday* - (Pr. khudo) God.
- kuday/tülöö* - a feast at which a sheep or a goat is offered in thanking God for saving a family member from dangerous situations such as surviving a deadly accident, illness, or returning home safely from far away place after a long time of absence.
- kul* - slave; one who does not know his/her tribal history.
- kunaajin* - two-year-old cow.
- kunan bayge* - race of three year old horses.
- kürösh* - traditional wrestling.
- kurut* - small dried balls of sour curd made from whole milk.
- kuyruk-boor* - thinly sliced tail fat and liver dipped in salty broth.
- lölü* - gypsy; beggar; homeless.
- maasi* - soft leather boots worn by men and women in Central Asia.
- medrese* - (Ar. "madrasa") religious school.
- mahalla* - (Uz.) village.
- majnun tal* - Central Asian name for a weeping willow.
- maktab* - (Ar.) "new method" schools introduced by the Muslim reformers, *jadids* at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Central Asia.
- manaschi* - singer of the epic *Manas*.
- mantı* - (Chin. *mantou*) steamed dumplings.
- mashab* - (Ar.) religious schools in Islam.
- mastava* - (Pr./Uz.) soup made from fried meat, vegetables, and rice.
- mazar* - a sacred cite for worship; shrine of Muslim/Sufi saint.
- mendiker* - (Pr./Uz. *mandikor*) hired laborer.
- meyit* - (Ar.) deceased.
- moldo* - mullah.
- momun* - (Ar.) a kind and soft spoken person, sometimes the word is used as derogatory term for someone who cannot protect himself by standing up against others, who is easily manipulated.
- muftiyat* - Muslim Spiritual Board.
- musiybat* - (Ar.) grief related to death.
- musulmanchilik* - Muslimness, term used quite often in Central Asia for Muslim customs or manners of behavior.
- namıs* - pride, with a positive connotation.
- nan* - bread.
- napravlenie* (Rus.) medical referral
- navvaychi* - (Uz. *navvoi*) baker who bakes traditional round flat bread in a clay *tandoor*.
- nike* - (Ar. *nikoh*) Muslim marriage ceremony.
- ochok* - a stone hearth on which food is cooked.
- ogorod* - (Rus.) land in one's courtyard in which fruits and vegetables are grown.
- Ogotur* (correctly *Okatar*, lit.: "bullet or arrow shooter," i.e., "hunter.") one of the clans of the Kyrgyz Saruu tribe.
- OMS (Rus. *Obshestvennaia Meditsinskaya Strakhovka*) - Social Medical Insurance.
- ona vatan* - (Uz.) motherland.
- ooz achar/auz ashar* (Kz.) - lit.: opening one's mouth, i.e., breaking of the fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

- oomiyin* - amen, said after a prayer/blessing or a meal by stroking one's face with the palms of both hands.
- otko chakiruu* - first welcoming of the new bride by her *kayin aga*, her husband's older brothers and uncles into their home/hearth.
- otko kirüü* - the new bride's first visit to the hearth of her *kayin agas*, older brothers of her husband.
- otochi* - (Mong.) curer among the Daur Mongols.
- ökürüü* - men's crying out loud, lamenting the deceased
- qam* - (Mong.) shaman.
- pir* - (Pr.) a Sufi saint/master.
- Pobeda* - (Rus. Victory) former name of an Uzbek collective farm in the Namangan province of Uzbekistan.
- raykom* - (Rus.) district governor.
- rayon* - (Rus.) regional administration.
- saanchi* - professional cow milker.
- salt* - tradition, custom
- sanat-nasiyat* - (Pr./Ar.) songs of advice, composed by native Kazakh and Kyrgyz poets.
- sanjira* - (Pr.) genealogy, tribal genealogy
- sarbap* - (Pr.) type of silk.
- sari may* - clarified butter.
- Saruu* - one of the three major tribes among the Kyrgyz.
- Sayapker* - hunter who hunts with birds.
- sejde* - the touching the ground with one's head during a prayer.
- sel' sovet/sel'skii sovet* - (Rus.) village council during the Soviet period.
- shashlik* - shish kebab.
- sherine* - traditional gathering of people at which songs are sung.
- shirdak/törböljün* - traditional appliqué felt.
- shiypan* - building out in the field in which the cotton pickers were housed during the cotton picking season.
- sinikchi* - bone setter.
- som* - Kyrgyz monetary unit.
- samsa* - pastry filled with meet and onions and baked in a clay *tandoor*.
- soop* - (Ar.) a kind deed.
- sorpo/shorpo* - clear broth in which mutton is boiled.
- sörü* - a wide square shaped wooden platform used for sitting in the courtyard of the dwellings during summer time in Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan.
- sovkhoz* - (Rus.) state farm.
- soyush* - a sheep which is allotted for a group of guests of less than twelve persons.
- spekulant* - (Rus.) a term used for an illegal trader during the Soviet period.
- sürsügön et* - air dried, sometimes smoked salty meet.
- suzmö* - thick salted yogurt.
- tabüt* - (Pr.) a flat wooden frame to carry the deceased's body to the grave.
- taga jurt* - relatives from the maternal grandparent's side.
- taziya/tajiya* - (Ar.) condolence for the relatives of the deceased.
- talkan* - sweetened powdered corn.

*tay* - one year old horse.  
*tayata* - maternal grandfather.  
*tayeke/taga* - maternal uncle.  
*tayene* - maternal grandmother.  
*teksiz* - rootless, one who does not know his/her tribal history.  
*Tänri/Tengir* – The Old Turkic term for Sky and God.  
*Tengrichilik* - a new term coined by Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals to describe the ancient worldview of the Altaic peoples.  
*tergöö* - Kyrgyz and Kazakh tradition of not calling her in-laws and the siblings of her husband by their names.  
*tilavat* - recitation from the Quran after a meal.  
*tiyïn* - coin.  
*togolok jetim* - complete orphan.  
*tör* - seat of honor, opposite the door.  
*törkün* - a wife's kinsmen. A married woman uses the term when referring to her own parents, relatives, and kinsmen in general.  
*törö aga* - director; head; leader.  
*torpok* - one-year-old cow.  
*tumar* - talisman.  
*tüندیк* -the round-shaped wooden hoop at the top of a yurt which allows smoke to get out.  
*tushoo kesüü* - a feast to mark a child's first steps. Strings are tied to the child's legs and ceremonially cut.  
*tütin* - household/family. In nomadic society, one yurt or family was considered one *tütin*.  
*tuugan-uruk* - relatives and kinsmen.  
*uguzuu* - (from "uk-" to hear, listen), lit.: "making understand," i.e., letting the immediate family members of a deceased know in person about the death.  
*ulak/kök börü* - game played by group of horsemen who fight over a goat's carcass filled with coarse wet salt.  
*umma* - (Ar.) the world community of Muslims who share the same religious belief, practices, conducts, and values affirmed in the Quran.  
*univermag* - (Rus.) universal *magazin*, i.e., department store.  
*uruk* - seed; clan within a tribe.  
*uruu* - tribe.  
*uuk* - the poles connecting the yurt's *kerege*, collapsible side walls to the *tüندیк*, the disk on the top through which the light enters and smoke escapes.  
*vremianka* - (Rus.) a separate smaller house with two rooms built next to the main house  
*Zamzam* - (Ar.) the name of a well in Mecca.  
*ziyarat* - (Pr.) Muslim pilgrimage to the the tombs/shrines of Muslim/Sufi saints.  
*ziyofat/gap* - (Pr./Uz.) traditional gathering among Uzbek men and women who gather separately to share food, engage in conversations, and sing songs and dance.  
*znachok* - (Rus.) a pin with young Lenin's picture worn by kindergarten children during the Soviet period.

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Appendix A:  
Proverbs and Sayings Used in the Dissertation

*Chikkan kiz chiyden tishkari,*

“A girl, who has left [her house by marrying], is outside [her family’s business].

*Törkünü jakindin töshögü jiyilbayt,*

“The bed of a woman whose *törkün*<sup>407</sup> is close by is never folded up,” i.e., she takes off to visit her own parents (in the morning) without putting her bed away.

*Jakshi ümüt -- jarim mal,*

“A good (positive) outlook is (already) half a piece of livestock.

*Adam, adam menen adam bolot,*

“A person isn’t a person without other people.”

*Bata menen er kögöröt, jamgir menen jer kögöröt,*

“Blessings make a man grow, rain makes the earth grow (become green).”

*El karagan betimdi, jer karatpa,*

“Do not make my face which looks up at other faces, looking down at the ground!”<sup>408</sup>

*Kaynasa kanı koshulbas (el/dushman),*

“Even if you boil it, blood (i.e., of enemies/certain people) won’t mix.”

*Özbek öz agam, sart sadagam,*

“An Uzbek is my own brother, a Sart is just my pocket change.

*Kirgiz kir aylangicha, Sart tam aylangicha,*

“[The kindness of] the Kyrgyz lasts all the way around mountain (i.e., for a long time), that of the Sarts’ all the way around the house (i.e., for a very short period).”

*Sartiın toyuna bargicha, ariqtin boyuna bar,*

“It is better to go to a stream than to a Sart’s feast.”<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> *Törkün* is the term denoting the married woman’s own parents and relatives and her tribe in general.

<sup>408</sup> This means that if children do bad things they will bring a great shame to their parents and all kinsmen and those Kyrgyz who come from good tribal background do not want do bad things such as all kinds of crime, prostitution etc.

<sup>409</sup> According to Kyrgyz, when a person goes to a stream, he/she at least can dip bread into the water, eat it and be full, but when a Kyrgyz person goes to a Sart’s feast, the amount of food served for guests isn’t sufficient to make him/her full.

*Jeen el bolboyt, jelke taz bolboyt,*

“*Jeen*<sup>410</sup> will never be considered one of your own, the nape of your neck will never go bald.”

*Jeen*<sup>411</sup> *kelgiche jeti börü kelsin,*

“It is better to have seven wolves come over than having a *jeen* visit”

*Kızdiki kıziktirat, uulduku uukturat,*

“The child of your daughter looks cute, the child of your son makes you melt.”

*Bakıldagan tekeni suu kechkende köröbüz, shakıldagan jengeni üy chechkende köröbüz,*

“We will see the proud male goat when he struggles crossing the river, we will see the boisterous sister-in-law when she struggles dismantling the yurt.”<sup>412</sup>

*Enesin körüp kızın al, eshigin körüp törünö öt,*

“One looks at the mother before marrying her daughter, just like one looks around the house before taking the seat of honor.”

*Kızduu üydö kil jatpayt,*

“Not even a strand of hair lies in the house that has a daughter.”

*Kızga kırk jerden tüyu,*

“For a girl, rules come from forty (many) people.”

*Buudaydın barar jeri -- tegirmen, kızdın barar jeri -- küyöö,*

“The final destination for wheat is a mill, and for a girl is a husband.”

*Kız -- konok,*

“A daughter is a guest [one day she will leave her parent’s house.]”

*Töshü tüktüü Jer ursun, töbösu achik Kök ursun!,*

“May you be cursed by the Earth which has a hairy chest and by *Kök* (the blue Sky) which has an open top!”<sup>413</sup>

*Kelindi kelgende kör, kempirdi ölgöndö kör,*

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<sup>410</sup> Children of a female relative.

<sup>411</sup> Children of a female relative.

<sup>412</sup> This saying grew out exclusively from the Kyrgyz nomadic culture in which the dismantling of the yurt was done mainly by women. Because a yurt must be dismantled quickly (15-20 minutes), there are specific techniques. Women (in the past) were required to have these skills.

<sup>413</sup> Here the Earth is likened to a human being as having a hairy chest: the trees or forests on Earth are considered the hair and the Sky is viewed as having no top. This popular curse in Central Asian oral literature very well reflects people’s ancient cosmology and worship of nature, Earth and Sky as gods.

“One should see a new bride when she arrives [at her husband’s house], and one should see an old woman when she dies.”<sup>414</sup>

*Moldonun aytkanin kil, kilganin kilba,*

“Do what the mullah says, but don’t do what he does.”<sup>415</sup>

*Ölöngdүү jerde ögüz semiz, ölük köp jerde moldo semiz,*

“An ox gets fat where there is much grass, a mullah gets fat where there is much death.”<sup>416</sup>

*Ishengen kojong suuga aksa, aldi-aldingdan tal karma,*

“If your trusted *khoja* is carried away by a river, then you should all grab onto a willow tree.”<sup>417</sup>

*Jolung shidir bolsun, joldoshung Kidir bolsun!*

“May your road be smooth and your companion be *Kidir*!”<sup>418</sup>

*Uluk bolsong, kichik bol,*

*Biyik bolsong, japiz bol.*

If you are big (great), be small (modest),

If you are high, be low (in status).

*Uluuga urmat,*

*Kichүүgö ifaat.*

Reverence for the elderly,

Respect for the young.

*Karidan uyat kaytsa,*

*Jashtan iyman kaytat.*

If the elderly lose their dignity,

The youth loses morality.

*Ashikkan azat,*

<sup>414</sup> The new bride arrives in her new home -- that is her husband’s -- with a wonderful dowry which will be displayed for the public to view. When an old woman dies, in a similar way her *olümtük*, a collection of new and valuable clothes, jewelry, and precious textiles--which will be distributed to those who wash her body--are also hung inside the yurt.

<sup>415</sup> It implies a *mullah* always tells people to do good things, but he himself does bad or inappropriate things which are against Shari’a.

<sup>416</sup> In other words, a *mullah* receives payments in different forms at each funeral where he recites the *janaza* prayer for the dead.

<sup>417</sup> It means that one should not rely on a *khoja* all the time, but rely on oneself.

<sup>418</sup> *Kidir* is a holy character from the Quran who aids travelers on their journeys.

*Toybogon tozot.*

The impatient one becomes exhausted,  
The insatiable one becomes weary.

*Bay soyuuga kozu tappay,  
Jardinin jalgiz kozusun suraptir.*

Not finding a lamb to kill (eat),  
The rich man asked for the poor man's only lamb.

*Töönün eki örköchiünün birin kesse  
Birin kühü jok,  
Eki emcheginin birin kesse,  
Birin sütü jok.*

If you cut one hump off a camel,  
The second hump has no strength.  
If you cut off one of her teats,  
The other one gives no milk.

*Totu kush bashin körüp kubanat,  
Butun körüp ardanat.*

When the parrot sees her head, she is happy,  
When she sees her feet, she is ashamed.

*Jalgiz bolsong chogool bol,  
Köp janinan tüngülsün.  
Jardi bolsong kooz bol,  
Bay malinan tüngülsün.*

If you are an only child, be strong,  
So the many lose hope for their lives,  
If you are poor, be beautiful,  
So the rich lose faith in their wealth [livestock].

*Jakasi jok ton bolboyt,  
Jabuusu jok üy bolboyt.*

There can be no coat without a collar,  
There can be no yurt without a [felt] cover.

*Jakshidan bashchi koysong, el tüzötöör,  
Jamandan bashchi koysong, el jüdötöör.*



If you appoint a good person as a leader,  
The people will prosper,  
If you appoint a bad person as a leader,  
The people will diminish.

*Engkeygenge engkeygin*  
*Atangdan kalgan kul emes, (Siy-principle)*  
*Kakayganga kakaygin*  
*Paygambardin uulu emes. (Namis-principle)*

Be modest to those who are modest to you,  
They are not your father's slaves, ("principle of respect")  
Be haughty to those who are haughty to you,  
They there are not the Prophet's son. ("principle of honor")

*Ittin eesi bolso,*  
*Böriün Tengiri bar.*

If a dog has a master,  
A wolf has *Tengir*.

*Atkan ok tashtan kaytpayt,*  
*Elchi kandan tilin tartpayt.*

A shot bullet does not return from the rock,  
The envoy does not hesitate to criticize the khan.

*Joktun bir armani bar*  
*Bardün ming armani bar.*

A poor man has one concern,  
A rich man has thousand concerns.

Appendix B:  
Kyrgyz Traditional *Koshok* which my Mother Suusar Sang  
When Her Father, Süyüinali Died in 2000.

Kündün bir körkü asmanda,  
Külüktün körkü baskanda.  
Külpötü eleng üyüngdün,  
Küldürüp köngül achkanga.

The beauty of the Sun is in the sky,  
The beauty of a fast running horse in its stride.  
You were the delight of your family  
When you made everyone happy.

Aydin bir körkü asmanda,  
Argimäc körkü baskanda.  
Azili eleng üyüngdün,  
Aytiship köngül achkanga.

The beauty of the Moon is in the sky,  
The beauty of a stallion is in its stride.  
You were the merry maker of your house  
We enjoyed your fun stories.

Bekter bir kelet bel aship,  
Beline belboo jaraship.  
Bek uulunday bir boorum,  
Sen kayakka ketting adaship?  
Kandar bir kelet bel aship,  
Kanjarlau tekmat jaraship,  
Kan uulunday bir boorum,  
Kayakka ketting adaship?

*Beks* come riding over the hills,  
Wearing beautiful sashes around their waists.  
Oh, my liver [father], like the son of a *bek*,  
Where have you gone astray?  
Khans come riding over the hills,  
Wearing beautiful sword belts  
Oh, my liver, like the son of a khan,  
Where have you gone astray?

Tuura bir chikkan butakka,  
Turnalar ergip kono albayt.  
Altin bir bashing ötkön song,  
Tuugandar iy lap taba albayt.  
Kayrilip chikkan butakka,  
Karlighach ergip kono albayt.  
Kayran bir bashing ötkön song,  
Kalgandar iy lap taba albayt.  
Kökölöp uchkan kök kepter,  
Kök iyrim suunu mayram deer,  
Kagilayin bir boorum,  
Közüngdü ele körgön kayran deer.

The cranes no longer can land with joy  
On branches that grow straight.  
Once your golden head is gone,  
Your relatives won't find you by weeping.  
The swallows no longer can land with joy  
On branches that grow zigzagging.  
Now, once your noble head is gone,  
Those left behind won't find you by grieving.  
The blue pigeon that flies high in the sky,  
Considers the blue river fun.  
Oh, my dear liver,  
Those who knew you will praise you "what a  
blessed man he was!"

Asmandap uchkan ak kepter,  
Ak iyrim suunu mayram deer,  
Aylanayin shaarim,  
Atingdi ele ukkan kayran deer.

The white pigeon that flies high in the sky,  
Considers the white river fun.  
My dear city,<sup>419</sup>  
Those who hear your name will praise you saying  
"What a blessed man he was."

<sup>419</sup> *Shaarim*, "my city" is one of the terms of endearment in Kyrgyz. The happy personality of a person is compared to the life in a city where there are lot of festivities and activities that make one happy.

## Appendix: C

Tradition of Serving 12 *Jiliks*,  
Parts of a Sheep to Guests According to Their Age and Gender

1. Two *jambash*, the hind quarters, the most respected *jilik* served to the oldest male or female (if the sheep has a *kuymulchak*, a fat tail, then the oldest woman gets it);
2. Two *kashka jilik*, rear thighs, served to both men and women according to their age;
3. Two *chüköliü jilik*, lower rear legs with a knee bone, served to both men and women according to their age;
4. Two *dali*, shoulders;
5. Two *kar jilik*, upper forelegs: given to men or women who are younger than those who received the *kashka* and *chüköliü jilik*;
6. Two *joto/korto jilik*, lower front legs, served to the youngest person among the guests.

## Curriculum Vitae for Elmira M. Kuchumkulova

- Date of Birth: May 25, 1975
- Citizenship: Kyrgyz Republic
- Education:
- 2007 (Winter) Ph.D., Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies,  
Discipline: Anthropology  
University of Washington, Seattle, WA
- 1998 (Spring) MA, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization,  
*Specialization:* Comparative Study of the Oral Epic Tradition of Turkic Central Asia.  
University of Washington, Seattle, WA
- 1996 (Spring) BA, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization  
*Specialization:* Central Asian Turkic Languages & Literature.  
University of Washington, Seattle, WA
- Languages: Kyrgyz (native), Kazakh (fluent), Uzbek (fluent), Russian (fluent), English (fluent), Turkish (intermediate), German (reading knowledge)
- Courses Taught:
- Winter 2006 “Islam and Native Religion Among the Nomadic Peoples of Central Asia” (5 credits) (NEAR496/596),  
Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, UW
- Spring 2002 “Nomadic Cultures and Traditions of Central Asia: Past and Present” (5credits) (NEAR 496/596)  
Dept. of Near Eastern languages & Civilization, UW

Languages Taught in the Department of Near Eastern  
Languages & Civilization, University of Washington:

2005-2006	Intermediate/Advanced Kyrgyz
1999-2000	Teaching Assistant for Elementary Uzbek
Summer 2000	Teaching Assistant for Intensive Intermediate Uzbek
Summer 1999	Teaching Assistant for Intensive Elementary Kyrgyz
Summer 1997	Teaching Assistant for Intensive Elementary Kyrgyz
Summer 1996	Teaching Assistant for Intensive Elementary Kyrgyz
Summer 1995	Teaching Assistant for Intensive Elementary Kyrgyz

Awards:

2004-2005	Global Supplementary Grant. Open Society Institute, Soros Foundation
Winter 2004	MacFarlane Fellowship, College of Arts and Sciences, Univ. of Washington
2002-2004	Schwartz Fellowship Dept. of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization, University of Washington
2002-2003	Global Supplementary Grant. Open Society Institute, Soros Foundation
2001-2002	Global Supplementary Grant. Open Society Institute, Soros Foundation
2000-2001	Global Supplementary Grant. Open Society Institute, Soros Foundation
Spring 2004	Research Assistantship for Prof. Daniel Waugh, Dept. of History, Univ. of Washington Translation project of the Kyrgyz epic "Kojajash"

- Autumn 2001                      Research Assistantship for Professor Daniel Waugh,  
Dept. of History, UW, worked on the Silk Road website
- Spring 2001                      Research Assistantship for Professor Phillip Schyler,  
Dept. of Ethnomusicology, UW
- Autumn 1999                      Schwartz Fellowship  
Dept. of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization  
University of Washington
- 1998-1999                      Research Assistantship for Professor Ilse Cirtautas  
Dept. of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization
- Autumn 1997                      Schwartz Fellowship  
Dept. of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization  
University of Washington
- 1994-1996                      Tuition waivers and NAFSA Fellows  
to study at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA

Translation Projects:

The Kyrgyz epic *Kojojash*, version by Alimkul Üsönbayev.

The draft of this English translation is posted on the “Silk Road Seattle “ website of Professor Daniel Waugh, History Department, University of Washington, Seattle, WA  
*Kojojash*.

(URL: <http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/culture/culture.html>)

Translation of the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*. (Parts 1-7), version by Sayakbay Karalayev. The project is funded by the Silk Road Foundation, Director Adela Lee, Saratoga, California. Version by Sayakbay Karalaev. Translated by Elmira Köchümkulova and Daniel Waugh.

(URL:<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/culture/culture.html>)

Activities:

- 1996-1998                      President,  
Central Asian Studies Group, University of Washington

Lectures and Presentations:

- 2005 (April) A special one-hour live interview with the KCTUW Public Radio on the "Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan." Seattle, WA
- 2005 (May 19) "Kyrgyz Funeral Rites and Islam." Central Asian Studies Society, University of Chicago, IL.
- 2005 (May 5-7) "Reforming Kyrgyz Islam: Nomadic Customs vs. Islamic Shari'a." International Conference on "Islam, Asia, and Modernity." University of Washington, Seattle.
- 2004 (February 25) "Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan," presentation at the Central Asian Studies Group, UW.
- 2002 (May 25-27) "Local Conceptualizations of Islam in Central Asia", presentation given at a symposium titled "Mountains of Islam," Mountain Film Festival, Telluride, Colorado.
- 2000-2001  
(Jan. 8 and March 31) "The Nomads of Eurasia and Their Culture," two lectures given in the course on the "Silk Road," taught by Prof. Daniel Waugh. Dept. of History, UW
- 2000 (May 13) "The Image of the Bride/Daughter-in-law in Finnish and Kyrgyz Wedding Poetry"  
12th Annual Nicholas Poppe Symposium, UW
- 2000 (June 29) "A Kyrgyz Traditional Wedding" (with videotape)  
Summer Teachers' Seminar  
Sponsored by the Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies Center, UW.
- 1998 (April 9) "Kyrgyz Music Tradition"  
Washington State University,  
Pullman, WA
- 1998 (April) "The Kyrgyz Epic 'Manas'," lecture given in the course on "Islamic Middle Eastern Culture", taught by Prof. M. Shiva, Dept. Anthropology, UW.

- 1998 (May 9) The "Kutadgu Bilig" (1071): A "Mirror For Princes" Or A Work Of Central Asian "Wisdom" Literature?"  
Tenth Annual Nicholas Poppe Symposium, UW
- 1997 (October 30) "Kyrgyz Songs of Mourning"  
Central Asian Studies Group, UW
- 1997 (May 9) "Past, Present and Future: Messages for the Kyrgyz in Chingiz Aitmatov's 'White Ship'"  
Eighth Annual Nicholas Poppe Symposium, UW
- 1996 (May 9) "The Uprising of 1916 in the Poetry of the Kyrgyz Oral Poets"  
Ninth Annual Nicholas Poppe Symposium, UW

Musical Performances:

*(Traditional Kirghiz Songs Accompanied by Komuz and Recitation from the Epic "Manas")*

- 2005 (May 20) The 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Central Asian Music Festival.  
Central Asian Studies Society and WHPK,  
University of Chicago, IL
- 2004 (October 24) Türkfest, Seattle Center, Seattle, WA
- 2001 (September 29) 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Day of Music at the Seattle Art Museum  
and at the Seattle Symphony, Benaroya Hall.
- 2001 (May 11) The 2nd Annual Central Asian Music Festival.  
Central Asian Studies Society and WHPK,  
University of Chicago, IL
- 1998 (March 30) Conference on "Civil Society in Central Asia"  
Washington, D.C.
- 1998 (April 9) School of Music, Washington State University  
Pullman, WA.
- 1998 (February 5) School of Music, University of Washington  
Seattle, WA.
- 1997 (May 26) Seattle Folk Life Festival, Seattle, WA.



- 1996 (April 11-13) Conference on "The Struggle for Modernization and Democratization: The Case of the Former Soviet Central Asian Republics", University of Minnesota Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- 1996 (June 29) Annual Garden Series Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C.
- 1996 (November 22) "Meeting with a Song"  
A special 40 minutes musical program of my own singing on Kyrgyz National TV, Kyrgyzstan.