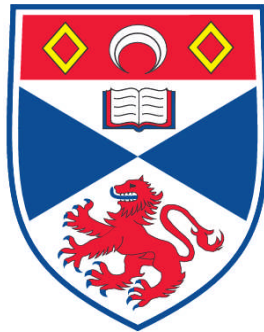


**MORAL GEOGRAPHIES IN KYRGYZSTAN:
HOW PASTURES, DAMS AND HOLY SITES MATTER IN
STRIVING FOR A GOOD LIFE**

Jeanne Féaux De La Croix

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St. Andrews**



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Moral Geographies in Kyrgyzstan:

how pastures, dams and holy sites matter in striving for a good life

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4th June 2010

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I, Jeanne Féaux de la Croix, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100.000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnography of how places like mountain pastures (*jailoos*), hydro-electric dams and holy sites (*mazars*) matter in striving for a good life. Based on eighteen months of fieldwork in the Toktogul valley of Kyrgyzstan, this study contributes to theoretical questions in the anthropology of post-socialism, time, space, work and enjoyment. I use the term ‘moral geography’ to emphasize a spatial imaginary that is centred on ideas of ‘the good life’, both ethical and happy. This perspective captures an understanding of *jailoos* which connects food, health, wealth and beauty. In comparing attitudes towards a Soviet and post-Soviet dam, I reveal changes in the nature of the state, property and collective labour. People in Toktogul hold agentive places like *mazars* and non-personalized places like dams and *jailoos* apart, implying not one overarching philosophy of nature, but a world in which types of places have different gradations of object-ness and personhood.

I show how people use forms of commemoration as a means of establishing connections between people, claims on land and aspirations of ‘becoming cultured’. I demonstrate how people draw on repertoires of epic or Soviet heroism and mobility in conceiving their life story and agency in shaping events. Different times and places such as ‘eternal’ *jailoos* and Soviet dams are often collapsed as people derive personal authority from connections to them. Analysing accounts of collectivization and privatization I argue that the Soviet period is often treated as a ‘second tradition’ used to judge the present.

People also strive for ‘the good life’ through working practices that are closely linked to the Soviet experience, and yet differ from Marxist definitions of labour. The pervasively high value of work is fed from different, formally conflicting sources of moral authority such as Socialism, Islam and neo-liberal ideals of ‘entrepreneurship’. I discuss how parties, poetry and song bring together *jakshylyk* (goodness) as enjoyment and virtue. I show how song and poetry act as moral guides, how *arman* yearning is purposely enjoyed in Kyrgyz music and how it relates to nostalgia and nature imagery. The concept of ‘moral geography’ allows me to investigate how people strive for well-being, an investigation that is just as important as focusing on problem-solving and avoiding pain. It also allows an analysis of place and time that holds material interactions, moral ideals, economic and political dimensions in mind.

Аннотация

Бул диссертация жайлоо, Гидро-Электро Станция (ГЭС) жана мазар сыяктуу жерлердин жакшы жашоого умтулууда канчалык мааниге ээ экендиги туурасындагы этнография. Бул суроо айрыкча жерге болгон мамилелеринин кескин өзгөрүшүн башынан өткөргөн элдер үчүн өтө маанилүү. Мисалы мындай кескин өзгөрүү деп көчмөндүүлүктөн Советтер Союзунун отурукташкан атуулу болуп, ошондой эле өлкө эгемендүүлүккө ээ болгондон кийинки жерди менчиктештирүү көрүнүштөрүн атасак болот.

Кыргызстандагы Токтогул айылында он сегиз айдын ичинде жасалган талаа изилдөөмдүн негизиндеги бул иш убакыт, мейкиндик, жумуш, жумуштан тышкаркы эс алуу убакыт жана пост-социализмдин антропологиясы туурасындагы теоретикалык суроолорго жооп берүүгө салымын кошот. Бул ишимде «жакшы жашоо» (бул жерде этикалык жактан да, бакытты белгилөөдө да) деген ойду берүүдө мен «моралдык география» деген терминди колдоном. «Моралдык географияны» анализдөөдө биз адамдардын жайлоого болгон түшүнүгүн, анын тамак-аш, ден-соолук, байлык, сулуулук менен болгон байланышын көрө алабыз. Ал эми жайлоону экономикалык тармак катары анализдеп кароо мындай түшүнүктөрдү камтымак эмес. Советтик жана пост-советтик учурдагы адамдардын Нарын ГЭСине болгон мамилелерин салыштыруу менен мен мамлекеттин жана коллективдүү иш алып баруулардын өзгөрүшү ГЭСти эки башка мааниге алып келгенин көрсөтөт. Кыргыз мамлекетине жана анын атуулдарына ГЭС жана жайлоого болгон тыгыз карым-катнашы кескин түрдө айырмалангандыктан бул жерлердин материалдуулугу жайлоо жана ГЭСтин «мамлекеттик мүлк» деген маанисин эки башка мааниде түшүндүрөт. Бул аргумент жердин жалаң гана социалдык түзүлүш экендиги туурасындагы аналитикалык перспективасын критикалайт. Токтогулдагы адамдар мазар сыяктуу ээси бар жерлерди ГЭС жана жайлоо сыяктуу жансыз жерлерден бөлүп карайт. Бул бир жалпы жаратылыш туурасындагы философиянын жок экенин, бирок ар кандай жерлер предметность ар башка даражаларга бөлүнөөрүн көрсөтөт.

Элдер бири-биринин ортосунда байланышты түзүүдө (биримдик, ынтымак), жерге болгон укугун алыш үчүн, же «маданияттуу» болууга

умтулууда ар кандай майрамдоолорду жана өтүп кеткен адамдарды эскерүүлөрүн өткөзгөнүн көрсөтөм. Тезисте элдердин өздөрү тууралуу айтып бергенде жана өздөрүнүн окуяларын кургандагы эркиндигин сезүүдө Советтер Союзу учурундагы баатырдыкка жана шамдагайлыкка же эпостогу репертуарларга кайрылгандары көрсөтүлөт. «Дайыма жашачу» жайлоолор жана Советтик ГЭСтер сыяктуу ар кандай убакыттар жана жерлер да жоюлуп, адамдар ушундай жерлерге болгон байланыштан жеке бийлик алышты. Коллективизация, приватизация жана Советтер Союзунун кулашын анализдөө менен менин максатым адамдардын Советтер Союзуна канчалык ностальгия менен карашаарын билүү. Бул учур элдер үчүн тиешелүү башкалар, «экинчи салт» катары жана азыркы учурун өткөн жана келерки убак менен салыштырып баалоочу мезгил катары каралат.

Элдер жумуш жасаган учурларында да «жакшы жашоого» умтулушат. Мисалы, алар канчалык бактылуу экенин ырларда чагылдырып, тойлордо көрсөтүшөт. Жашоонун ар бир тармагында баалуулуктар орун алган, мисалы, культура жана кыргызчылык алкагындагы жумуштун иерархиясы. Мисалы мен эмне үчүн жумуш тууралуу көп айтылат, канчалык жумуш тууралуу кыргыздардын концепциясы Советтер Союзундагы учурга жакын, бирок Марксизмдеги эмгек тууралуу аныктамадан айырмаланганын түшүндүрөм. Көбүнчө жумушка болгон бийик баалуулук моралдуу бийлик тууралуу ар кандай карама-каршы ойду камтыган, мисалы, социализм, ислам, жана нео-либералдардын «ишкердиги» саяктуу булактардан турат.

Тойлорду талкуулоо жумуш эмнеге керек, элдер эмнени жасаганды жакшы көрүшөт деген сыяктуу аргументтерди кеңейтет. Мен ырлардын моралдуулукка чакырган социалдык ролун бөлүп карайм. Мисалы арман кыргыз музыкасында элдерге жаккан уруу сезими жана ал элдердин Советтер Союзуна болгон ностальгиясына канчалык байланышы бар экенин көрсөтөм. Тойлор жыргал жана ырыс түрүндөгү жакшылыкты алып келет, ошондой эле той элдердин карым-катнашын сактайт. Мисалы, ырларда сүйүү тууралуу айтылганда жаратылыштагы образдар сүрөттөлөт, ошондой эле ал образдар адамдардын жайлоодогу, мазардагы жаратылыштын кооздугун баалагандыгын да көрсөтөт. «Моралдык география» концепциясын колдонуу менен мен адамдардын кандайча жакшылыкка умтулганын изилдей алам. Менин көз

карашымда адамдарга канчалык маселени чечүү же орудан арылуу маанилүү болсо, жакшылыкка умтулуу да ошондой мааниге ээ. Бул ошондой эле материалдуу байланыштарды, моралдуу идеалдарды, жана экономикалык жана саясий тараптарын эске тутулушун камтыган убакытты жана жерлерди анализдөөгө өбөлгө түзөт.

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Ыраазычылык

Көптөгөн адамдар мага ушул диссертациям менен жашап аны жазып бүтүргөнүмө жардам беришти. Биринчиден, ушул долбоорду каржылаган Карнеги Уюмуна жана Сэнт Эндриус Университетине чоң ыраазычылыгымды билдиргим келет. Ошондой эле мен өзүмдүн жетекчилерим Стефани Банн жана Рой Диллейге рахматымды айтам. Алар мен үчүн чоң тирөөч болушуп, менин ишимди сындап, баалап беришти. Билимин жана убактыларын бөлүшкөндүгү үчүн мен эки жетекчиме тең абдан ыраазымын.

Мага болгон чоң үмүт менен жол көрсөтүп, дем берип тургандыгы үчүн чоң атам Джон жана чоң энем Айлиин, атам Гай жана энем Памелага абдан ыраазымын. Аларсыз мен бул дүйнөгө келмек эмесмин. Мен өзүмдүн асыл жолдошум Майклга анын чыдамына жана мени Кыргызстанда жашаганымга эркиндик бергендиги үчүн рахматымды айтам. Мени менен чоогу Борбордук Азияны кыдырып, таанып билишкендиги үчүн мен үй-бүлөмө ыраазымын.

Акылбек жана анын үй-бүлөсү: Касымбай ата, Жайлоокан апа, Таалайбек, Назгүл жана Айзада Эже менин долбоорума кызыкчылыгын көрсөтүп, жылуу кабыл алгандыгына мен абдан кубанычтамын. Изилдөөмдү жүргүзүп жатканда силердин мага көрсөткөн колдооор мен үчүн абдан баалуу. Камчыбек жана Жайкал, Осмонбек ата жана Алиман апанын үйүндө, анын балдары жана неберелери, айрыкча небереси Айзададан мен экинчи үйүмдү таптым. өзүңөрдүн жашооңордон мен үчүн орун тапканыңарга мен абдан ыраазымын. өздөрүнүн коллективине мени жылуу кабыл алгандыгы үчүн мен Аидаи эжеге жана Бел-Алды мектебинин мугалимдерине рахмат айтам: мен силер менен бирге сабак бергенден чоң ырахат алдым. Ошондой эле достук мамилелери үчүн Гүлмайрам, Асмаатжан, Нургүл, Айжамал жана алардын үй-бүлөлөрүнө чоң рахмат. Менин атымды карап, мага кантип атты багып, караш керек экенин үйрөткөндүгү үчүн Ошбай акеге абдан ыраазымын. Мен Бел-Алдынын жана Совет айылдарынын жашоочуларына ыраазычылыгымды билдирем: мен эч качан силердин меймандостугуңарды, жардамыңарды, жана менин суроолорума чыдамдуулук менен жооп бергениңерди унутпайм. Мен баарыңардан көптү үйрөндүм.

Ишимдин өнүгүшүнө салым кошкондугу үчүн терең ыраазычылыгымды

менин коллегаларыма жолдогум келет.

Толкунбек Асыкулов менин Бишкектеги биринчи үй-бүлөм жана мага сан жеткиз суроолорума жооп тапканга жардам берди. Мен ага жана анын географ коллегаларына Матиас Шмидт жана Бернд Штайман да рахматымды айтам. Алар менен болгон талкуулар менин ой жүгүртүүмдү жакшыртты. Менин Борбордук Азиядагы Америка Университетинин Антропология бөлүмүндө иштеген учурумдун көңүлдүү жана пайдалуу өтүшүнө мен Айгерим Дыйканбаева, Аида Алымбаева жана Дамира Уметбаевага рахматымды айтам. Ачык оюн жана убакытын бөлүшкөндүгү үчүн Гульнара Айтпаева жана Айгине изилдөө борборунун мүчөлөрүнө рахмат. Мен аларга жана Джон Шоберлайнга мен оруканада жатканда мени карап турганына терең ыраазымын. Мен «Эвразияда антропологияны куруу» аттуу окутууну өнүктүрүү багытындагы регионалдык семинарга катышкам: семинардан көптөгөн пайдалуу нерселерди үйрөнгөндүгүм үчүн семинардын уюштуруучуларына жана катышуучуларына ыраазычылыгымды билдирем.

Ошондой эле Сэнт Эндриус университетинин Социалдык Антропология бөлүмүнүн мугалимдерине жана мен менен окуган студенттерине рахмат: силер менен болгон маектер жана силердин кеңештериңер мага чоң жардам берди. Кыргыз тилин үйрөнгөнүмө жардам берип, суроолорума жооп берип, маектерди жана ырларды англис тилине которуп бергендиги үчүн мен Бактыгүл Тулебаевага терең ыраазычылыгымды билдирем. Убакытын бөлүп ушул диссертациямды окуп салымын кошкондугу үчүн мен көптөгөн коллегаларыма жана досторума ыраазымын: Лаура Адамс, Гүлзат Баялиева, Салли Каммиңс, Жан Грил, Майкл Хертсфельд, Бактыбек Исаков, Аксана Исмаилбекова, Бриджет Жексон, Джемма Джон, Каныкей Жайлобаева, Сильжа Клепп, Элмира Көчүмкулова, Мария Лоу, Пит Пепорте, Руслан Рахимов, Мадлен Риивс, Ребекка Рейнолдс, Мохира Суйаркулова, Айлии Суан жана Дамира Уметбаева. Мен баарыңарга ушул диссертациямды өнүктүрүүгө жардам бергениңер үчүн рахмат айтам. Албетте, ишимдеги кетирилген кемчиликтер жана каталар — баары меники. Бул диссертациямды мен баарыңарга арнаيم: келечекте силер менен маектешип, майрамдоону чын жүрөктөн күтөм.

Note on Transliteration

For Russian, I have used the standard Library of Congress transliteration system, without diacritics. For Kyrgyz I use the same system with the following additions:

Ө = Ö Pronounced like a German ‘ö’, or as in French ‘peu’.
Shape the mouth to say ‘May’ and then purse the lips.

У = Ü Pronounced like a German ‘ü’, or as in French ‘vue’.
Shape the mouth as if to say ‘E’, then purse the lips.

Ң = NG ng as in ‘thing’.

Ж = J a hard ‘J’ as in ‘jam’.

All foreign terms are Kyrgyz, unless otherwise indicated. Since Russian and Kyrgyz plurals are not easily deducible for English readers, I have used English plurals (not italicized).



Figure 1: Töö Ashuu Pass to Suusamir

Chapter 1: Introduction

5th April 2007

I am travelling to my field site in Toktogul with my host mother Raima, and her youngest, eight-year old Nurik. He sits with me and does his best not to be sick. It is late April and Raima has been looking after the workmen building their new mud-brick house on the outskirts of Bishkek. It is an expensive investment, land prices and building materials having recently gone through the roof, as rural people follow a government invitation to seek employment in Bishkek. Now Raima's eldest son has a one-room house to live in while pursuing his law degree, with a small plot to tend some potatoes. Our driver Semetei is going home to Toktogul with his wife and daughter and has picked up extra passengers to pay for the petrol.

Leaving Bishkek, the Tashkent road runs at some distance parallel with the unrelentingly steep ranges of the Ala-Too. Apart from the flat Ferghana basin, Kyrgyz lands are forcefully dissected by mountain ranges, with routes of passage carved more or less steeply or generously by fast-flowing rivers and grass-covered passes. We are in fact travelling the one major road between the North and South of the country: the tarmac has just been laid on the last of 600 kilometres. The novelty and fragility of this one link between the south and north is often indicated when discussing region-based political rivalries. It is the object of speculative fears over the possible break-up of Kyrgyzstan into an Uzbek-oriented south, and a North with stronger links to Kazakhstan and Russia. Our destination, the district of Toktogul and attendant hydroelectric dam, lies halfway between Bishkek and the next large city, southern Jalal-Abad.

We speed past Russian-style houses flanking the road seamlessly as one village runs into another. After an hour, the road leaves the last former industrial centres behind and enters the first navigable river gorge. The road dives upward into the heart of the rust-red mountain range, finally heaving and coiling up the pass to a tunnel at 3600 metres: the work of Moscow metro engineers. After three kilometres of heart-stopping darkness and fumes in the tunnel, we rush straight into the sky, with a wide high valley lined by mountains spreading before us.

This is *Suusamir*, famed for the quality of its pastures that once drew people from as far as Kazakhstan. We pass many yurts (*boz üi*) by the roadside, offering the season's first *kymyz* (fermented mare's milk) and cream. Such mountain pastures are known as



Figure 2: Suusamir jailoo on the main road between Northern and Southern Kyrgyzstan

jailoo.¹ As we descend into Jalal-Abad province and the Toktogul district, the vegetation gradually changes from berberis bushes and Central Asian conifers to birches, almond and chestnut trees. This is a favourite picnic destination from nearby Toktogul. As the valley broadens, reception picks up and our co-passengers announce their imminent arrival home by mobile phone. We glimpse the vast dam reservoir in the distance and pass by Toktogul town, which was built to house many of the people who were displaced by the dam-building programme in the 1970s. The series of dams on the Naryn now produce about 80 % of the country's electricity and the government is investing heavily in a new dam just twenty kilometres upstream. We swing past arid hills with a lush valley between them and pass our hands over our face in a gesture of blessing. The clumps of trees between the hills here hide the largest site of pilgrimage (*mazar*) of the area: Shamshykal. For the last hour of our journey, we turn off the main road and climb into the mountains. Bel Aldy, the last hamlet in the commune, is entirely populated by the patrilineal descendants of *Korosh*, apart from a few bee-keeping Russians. As Semetei's car strains to reach the village plateau above the swift river, Raima and I retie our headscarves, wake comatose Nurik and stuff the left-over bread into our plastic bags. We hope Raima's teenage daughters will be busy making dinner for us.

¹To be precise, there are many words for different kinds of pastures, for example: *jazdoo*, *jailoo*, *kuzdoo*, *kyshtoo* (spring, summer, autumn, winter pasture). I use the term *jailoo* because this was the general term for pastures that people used most, meaning any pasture that was away from the village, i.e. not winter pastures.



Figure 3: Map of the Kyrgyz Republic (Copyright Michael Féaux de la Croix)

Using arrival in a village as the starting point of an ethnography is a time-honoured tradition. It is precisely this journey however, and this ‘arriving’ that is the subject of this thesis. How do such different places as hydro-electric dams, the high pasture of Suusamir, the holy site of Shamshykal, the village Bel Aldy, Toktogul town and the capital Bishkek matter to someone like Raima or Semetei? Do places matter to people like them differently to the way they matter to someone like me? What makes a place a place? I also use ideas about places to investigate practices of ownership, belonging, work, travel and memory in the Toktogul valley. Since the dissolution of collective farms in the early nineties, a rapid and locally differentiated process of privatization has taken place, including the Toktogul dam and new ways of managing mountain pastures. Discussions of how these places should be used and by whom reveal a particular moral economy. Further, I ask what people enjoy about places: why do so many people’s eyes light up at the mention of the Suusamir pastures? What is so special about *mazars*?

This first chapter serves to circumscribe the research questions generated from different theoretical positions on the nature of place and space, and from my fieldwork experience. I will define my terms of engagement with the topic of place, and detail the

conditions in which I learnt about Kyrgyz dams, pastures, villages and *mazars*. Finally, I lay out the structure of the thesis.

Three Places: why *Jailoos*, Dams and *Mazars*?

Much of this thesis is taken up with analysing and comparing attitudes and practices around three places: *jailoos*, dams and *mazars*. On the map, these all look like very different kinds of places: *jailoos* cover huge areas of remoter Kyrgyzstan, dams are a series of huge blocks of water and machinery, and *mazars* are usually small, widely distributed points of pilgrimage. And yet, as I will show in chapters 2 to 4, contrasting them is highly instructive. Firstly, it allows me to investigate how and why they all generate strong feelings and a very broad spectrum of attitudes and practices, including varying patterns of state control. Secondly, contrasting three very different kinds of places, each associated with different domains such as economics, politics and religion, allows me to investigate whether the people I met in Toktogul had some overarching philosophy of space or place. If people attribute forms of personhood and agency to holy sites, does the same apply to a dam or *jailoo*? How do people conceive of the relationship between the past and future of their lives in these places?

Scholars approach the region known as Central Asia (currently defined as the five ‘stans’ Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) most frequently to study Islam - often conceived as a threat- or as a post-Soviet region where ‘transition’, democratization and privatization is happening- or not.² Historically, Central Asia is most famous for nomads and the great cities of the Silk Road. Along with much of Central Asia, Kyrgyz people and their leaders were loosely subject to successive khanates, the last of which, Kokand, was defeated by Russia in the mid-19th century. Having fought and allied with various Kyrgyz leaders, Russia set about building military forts, trade posts and finally railways. The Toktogul valley had a garrison of sorts, and the administrative post ‘Pishpek’, later became Kyrgyzstan’s capital (known in Soviet times as ‘Frunze’ and as ‘Bishkek’ since independence). Dogged by uprisings throughout the colonial period, the 1916 violent protest against the war draft and loss of land to Russian settlers is well remembered for the harsh

² Central Asia is sometimes also made to include Afghanistan and Xinjiang. Russian scholarship used to speak of ‘Central Asia and Kazakhstan’. Central Asia is also subsumed within Inner Asia, which stretches through Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, the republic of Mongolia and sometimes Siberia.

retaliations and consequent flight of many Kyrgyz and other Central Asians to China and Afghanistan.

It is a matter of great debate when the Kyrgyz came to be as an ethnic category: certainly 19th century travel accounts did not always differentiate them from Kazakhs, and the (now national) epic *Manas* may not have focused on the Kyrgyz in earlier versions. Kyrgyzstan as a modern state came into being on its current territory through Stalin's border-delimitations in the 1920s. From 1936 to 1991 Kyrgyzstan was a republic of the USSR, fully integrated in the centralized economy and ruled from Moscow. Under the leadership of Askar Akayev from 1991, Kyrgyzstan was at first hailed as the 'island of democracy' in Central Asia, receiving large amounts of aid from Europe, the USA, and more recently, Russia. Indeed, one of the key factors determining Kyrgyzstan's politics is that it is the only country in the world to host both a Russian and American military base.

In 2005 street protests fuelled by discontent over poverty and corruption known as the 'Tulip revolution' ousted Akayev and brought his former Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev to power. Early on in my encounters with Kyrgyzstan from 2005, people in Bel Aldy and elsewhere hoped the Tulip Revolution might improve their lives. As my stay lengthened, many of these hopes soured, replaced by indifference to politics and the explosion of anger and desperation that ousted Bakiev in turn in April 2010. At present, the political future of Kyrgyzstan and its citizens looks highly uncertain.

In an area such as Toktogul, these histories have clearly left their mark with a flooded valley and dam barrage, collectivized and decollectivized agriculture, roads, new towns and settlements. One of the big questions dogging me was how people made sense of these changes they had lived through. Clearly whatever I learnt during fieldwork could not be described as some ahistorical 'eternal' village life. Here were people living through extraordinary times. I will address these questions head-on in chapters 5 and 6.



Figure 4: Demonstrations in Bishkek 2006. The large banner reads ‘Let there be reform’.

Toktogul interested me as a region not only because of the impact of the dam, but also because it did not seem to fit the line so often drawn between North and South Kyrgyzstan. Northerners often described it as being part of the South, Southerners did the opposite, and Toktogul people liked to talk about it as the navel of Kyrgyzstan. It was a place to pass through, not studied by ethnographers since the 1970s, but famous for its musicians, traditional bards and pop stars. Unlike other areas of Kyrgyzstan, there are now very few Russians, Uzbeks, Meskhetian Turks or members of the many other minority groups around Toktogul.³ In this thesis, I do not attempt to describe ‘the Kyrgyz’ worldview, not only because I am in no position to do so, but also because I doubt such a homogenous worldview exists. Most of the time I speak of the Toktogul area, though where interlocutors described

³ A somewhat unreliable population census recently estimated Kyrgyz at 69% of the population (National Statistics Committee 2009). Their proportion has been increasing since the late Soviet period: since then many Russian and German-speakers have left, and Kyrgyz also tend to have more children than other groups. Russian is the second language of Kyrgyzstan, its official status is disputed.

something or thought of something as Kyrgyz, I use their vocabulary. I talk through a complex of fragments of conversations and inter-locking scenarios, that will I hope reveal how the people I engaged with thought about mountain pastures, felt about dams and interacted with *mazars*.

Research Questions and Theoretical Approach

Why was it that for most of my fieldwork, I felt I was not learning anything much about ‘place’ or ‘landscape’? Why did I feel this, despite living on quite intimate terms with people's experience and stories about the place we lived in, and being a social player on a geographically inflected ‘field’? Somehow I wanted to hear people talk directly about what I thought of as place: about mountains, orchards, roads and buildings – and I wanted to hear stories. Instead, we talked about families and work, education and food. I learnt about what I thought of as place by buying a horse, photographing growing plants, visiting people and by watching the snow recede from high pastures. My main challenge has been to reconcile my conversations about families and work, education and history with what I thought of as place, and so coming to a new understanding of how these things resonate in people’s lives. I now turn to the theoretical approaches that I have found most useful in pursuing these questions, namely those of Massey, Appadurai, Ingold and Latour. Where can these approaches make good sense of Kyrgyz dams, *jailoos* and *mazars*, and where can people’s relations with these places feed back into theory?

The scholarly literature abounds with myriad definitions of ‘place’ and ‘space’, ‘landscape’ and ‘environment’. Each attempt to define these is both a way of determining a useful perspective for investigating object x (there is no overarching term except ‘world’ in English), a truth-claim of these descriptions, and also the *outcome* of research. There are broadly four streams of thinking about places of interest to me: the first attends to them primarily as material objects. This is true of Gibson’s idea of environmental ‘affordances’ (Gibson 1979), of approaches that see landscape features as ‘mnemonic pegs’ and of many Marxist-influenced scholars, such as Hann and others studying property relations in post-socialist countries (Hann 2003).

The second approach is to treat place as a social construct or performance, an outcome rather than an *a priori*. Harvey describes places as ‘*the site of relations between attributes, a node of relations*’ (Harvey 1996: 263), or as Massey puts it, ‘*if space is social*

relations and activity spaces, we can think of places as the location of particular sets and intersections of such places and relations' (Massey 1995: 63). She adds elsewhere: '*Just to be clear, this is not to invoke yet another form of spatial fetishism. It is not, of course, the places themselves which interact but social relations which take place between agents "within" them.*' (Massey 1994: 121) In this framework, places are constructs, manifestations of social relations that can be 'read' like texts. Theorists such as Rose and de Certeau further define a place as something that is done, performed or enacted rather than the mute scene of action. They argue that the naming of a place for example, is an act of power, a strategy (Rose 1999: 249, de Certeau 2000: 101). The advantage of the second approach is that it foregrounds human actions, interactions and perceptions and allows for many 'places' (constructs) to be co-present. The drawback is that places, which do have a physical dimension, come to look something like immaterial discourse. In this vein, Madeleine Reeves' ethnography of borders in the Ferghana valley, between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan reveals the border as a human artefact, something that is presented as an object, but on closer inspection has more attributes of an event, of a human activity than the geographical feature drawn as a line on maps. The border is an idea and a practice, made tangible not primarily by lines on a map, but by the presence of guards and certain passport categories (Reeves 2007a).

A third, related approach draws on phenomenology. Here, places are not only performed, they come into being as rhythms or taskscapes. '*Meaning does not cover the world but is immanent in the contexts of people's pragmatic engagements with its constituents.*' (Ingold 2000: 154) Ingold calls this the 'dwelling perspective': the self is an unfolding of relations with one's environment (Ingold 2000: 10-11). Since bodily engagement with the world is central to this perspective, Ingold has been criticized for fetishizing the body, and the individual.

The fourth stimulating approach is that of Bruno Latour, often described as Actor-Network-Theory. Like in Massey and Ingold's writings, here again relations create places rather than vice versa. In addition, Latour queries the human/non-human divide and gives agency to non-humans (Wylie 2007:201). This means that not *only* human relations (as in Massey's or Harvey's pronouncements) create places. Latour escapes the problematic of how places or other things can 'act' by showing the human/rest divide as an invention, a 'modern constitution':

‘In the modern perspective, Nature and Society allow explanation because they themselves do not have to be explained. Intermediaries exist, of course, and their role is precisely to establish the link between the two, but they establish links only because they themselves lack any ontological status. They merely transport, convey, transfer the power of the only two beings that are real, Nature and Society.’ (Latour 1993: 80)

According to Latour, people operating according to this schema (he calls them ‘moderns’) only differ from ‘pre-moderns’ not in what they do, but what they say they do: moderns do not recognize quasi-objects or hybrids, even as they make more of them than any premodern (Latour 1993:112). Latour advocates acknowledging such hybrids, and abandoning the belief that science is a-social and society a-natural. He suggests *‘invent[ing] a gradient that registers variations in the stability of entities from event to essence’* (Latour 1993: 85).

Each of these approaches has consequences in what can be grasped through an ethnography. A focus on politics, as in Reeves’ work, seems to make relations with non-human ‘nature’ fall off the back of the truck. Conversely, a phenomenological concern with landscape or environment can make politics fade away. Cosmologies and views on nature at first sight look like very apolitical subjects. However, the conflict between different perceptions in Tsing (1993, 2005) or Vitebsky’s work (2005) is shown to be highly politicized. It is the nature/culture dichotomy critiqued by Latour (amongst others like Descola) that often keeps the anthropology of human-environment relations and a political anthropology of places apart.

In each of the approaches above, the question how places matter is central. Although I have described these approaches as closely related, they also fundamentally disagree. Harvey for example writes: *‘to write of “the power of place” as if places (localities, regions, neighbourhoods, states etc.) possess causal powers is to engage in the grossest of fetishisms’* (Harvey 1996: 320). Nevertheless, it seems to me that humans experience the independent actions of other beings and forces such as other humans, animals and the rain every day. People experience the world, and it is important not to screen out this experience, as if we had no access to it, or way of talking about it. Our learning may be mediated and thoroughly human, but it is not at all remote from experience, as purely representational or symbolic studies might suggest. Nor does Harvey’s comment do justice to the fact that, if ideas of place

are bound up in power-inflected relationship between humans, so they are bound up with the possibilities a piece of the world offers – or withholds. To suggest otherwise is to screen out a very large chunk of influences on human thought and action. A good example is Bray's study of how the architecture of a family home in imperial China both reflected and produced a particular family and gender ideology by separating inner and outer quarters, male and female spheres (Bray 1997). Architecture embodies and therefore stabilises and reinforces shared values. It is a tool, a grammar that enables a variety of responses and spectrum of uses. There are material limits to the kind of interactions you can have with a house, or a toothbrush for example. Neither makes an ideal flying device.

Space, Place, the Local and the Global

The argument over how places matter extends to whether it is places or space(s) that the world is made of. Are places a special kind of space, or is space a particular kind of place? As Massey has pointed out, the idea of 'place' in English evokes specificity, history, authenticity and homeliness. Space on the other hand evokes neutral, even Euclidian geometries or the nothingness of the Earth in space (Massey 1995: 64). Appadurai assumes that place-making requires effort, particularly so in an increasingly deterritorialized and globalized world. He takes space as the given, place as the social creation (Appadurai 1990: 213).

Harvey on the other hand sees 'neutral' time and space as a capitalist invention that makes them comparable and creates a single currency in land and time (Harvey 1996: 253). Essentially, what he and other theorists like Appadurai have followed Marx in commenting on, is the way capitalism seeks to erase the relevance of time and space. This is done through technologies such as the telephone, internet and through a tying together of production and trade (i.e. labour) around the world. You can video conference, watch up-to-the-minute footage of wars on other continents, and expect exactly the same colour-coding in international hotel chains and airports around the world.⁴ Efficiency (i.e. speed and control) is the goal motivating such spatial arrangements and practices. Paradoxically, this analysis claims modern [capitalist] landscapes are *'dehumanized and ... impoverished of meaning, precisely because humans have excessively shaped and planned them in terms of economic*

⁴ One should note that it still makes an enormous difference to all parties involved whether for example a soldier kills with a sword, or by releasing bombs from an unmanned drone.

efficiency' (Relph 1981: 181). Appadurai calls this homogenization 'deterritorialization', a condition that affects group loyalties, state strategies and forms of wealth. For example, he suggests that homelands are no longer just inhabited, but that their imagination among migrants far from the homeland provokes a new identity politics with often violent effects. This meaninglessness is also expressed as an erosion of locality, a sense of placelessness, dislocation and insecurity. Such erosion is said to create a backlash evident in a hunger for 'identity' in identity politics and the heritage industry, for example.⁵ Appadurai further suggests that producing locality is a measure of power. For example, refugee camps are context-produced rather than context-generative (Appadurai 1990: 217).

More recently, Appadurai and others have questioned the postulated evenness and transparency of capitalist space. The kind of globalized economy we are familiar with relies on local differences in demand and supply, in labour and material costs, in attractiveness to tourists in order to function. Should these differences somehow cease to be, the economy and attendant sense of time and space/place would also alter radically. While the ideology of the nation-state has global currency, Reeves has shown in the case of Central Asian borders that *what* passport you travel with in which bit of the world has an enormous effect on your possibilities (Reeves 2007a). Access to a passport in the first place may be denied, and so recognition as a national of any kind. Malkki's ethnography of Hutu refugees in Burundi clearly shows that this partial deterritorialization (particularly of money) depends on strong territorializations, such as territorial states and citizens (Malkki 1995) For these reasons, I prefer speaking of 're-territorialization' according to new parameters rather than 'de-territorialization' (cf. Rofel 1999: 263).

Latour and others have further called into question the distinction of the local (often equated with place, as in Appadurai) and the global. '*Every network is local at all points, like a railway line. But it only works as long as someone pays for it, and it is not everywhere*' (my emphasis). Local and global have no content, except as each others opposite, in fact almost everything is at least a little of both (Latour 1993: 123, see also Law 2004). The idea of globalization, deterritorialization and neutral space is an ideology, an actively pursued process, for example by the creators and users of the World Wide Web. It is also an effect that may create new living conditions (see Green et.al. 2005 on efforts to create a

⁵ Appadurai defines locality (a.k.a place) as relational and contextual, imbued with a sense of social immediacy, technology of interaction, certain kinds of reproducibility and agency (Appadurai 1990: 204). An example might be the ideas and practices associated with 'university'.

homogenous EU-wide cyberspace). The idea of the local (meaningful) and global (strategically meaningless) depend on each other. Movements, both literal and metaphorical between the two become meaningful in light of this distinction. Like money, this idea only works as long as people believe in it.

Since the production of neutral capitalist space is a human enterprise, the production of these 'space' as well as 'place' effects must also be a measure of power, for example of (territorial) state, ideological and economic powers. The primacy of space over place cannot be assumed. Both historically and theoretically it makes more sense to consider this 'neutral' space *a particular kind of place*, rather than an *a priori*. Tsing has shown how much work has to be done to transform Indonesian rainforest as homes and places into neutral, freely available resources (Tsing 2005). In chapters 2-4 I will address whether use practices and senses of ownership around *jailoos*, dams and *mazars* presume such neutral spaces or not.

I suggest thinking about the local/global, place/space distinction as a Latourian constitution or as paradigms that enable us to do many things, and disable others. For example, to the party apparatus of early Soviet Kazakhstan, the steppe was largely a 'space' – empty rather than full of Kazakh homes (Payne forthcoming: 11). Imagining the steppe as a neutral space rather than differentiated home places allowed the state to pursue radical settlement and collectivization policy.

One might assume that large dams, projects built to exploit the natural force of gravity and water in order to supply electricity to industry and cities, are exactly the kind of places likely to be '*dehumanized and ... impoverished of meaning*' in their controlling efficiency. As I show below however, this assumption appears premature in light of the social history and ethnography of two very different dams: the Toktogul dam, built as an example of the 'friendship of the peoples' in the 1960s-70s and the Kambar Ata dam, a novel effort of the Kyrgyz government to boost its legitimacy and regional power. In how far did the Soviet version of industrial production eliminate the distinctiveness of localities? How did the Soviet state and Soviet forms of everyday life inhabit and produce its own distinctive localities, or 'neutral' space?⁶

Loefgren has referred to partial de-territorialization as an '*international cultural grammar of nationhood ... the national order of things secretes displacement, as well as*

⁶ Such questions have also been pursued by Buchli (1999), Crowley and Reid (2002), Buchli, Alexander and Humphrey (2007).

prescribed correctives for displacement' (Loefgren in Malkki 1995: 176). Malkki calls this regulation of movement a 'sedentarist metaphysic'. I think of this as one particular 'moral geography' (see below), an idea of space/place that affects the lives of Toktogul citizens. Another is the figure of the 'free nomad' that has made mobile herding the object of admiration and pride by local and international activists, researchers and tourists. Such a fascination with movement is also evident in currents of anthropology and philosophy such as Deleuze and Guattari's 'nomadism' (1988), Clifford's *Routes* or the many studies of transnationalism.

In this thesis I will deal with movement on the one hand in the shape of Soviet resettlement policies, and on the other with Raima and other people's sense of moving between country and city, *jailoo* and dam, migrant labour abroad and marriage into a husband's household. I will attend to the question how people conceive of 'distance' and remoteness, and how these are judged according to different frames of value.

Place and space are usually talked about as permanent, static while time is talked of more in terms of ephemerality and change. It is striking that English language thinkers have found a handful of terms for talking about place (landscape, space, environment), but only have one term for time. The connection between one and the other can most simply be discussed through the idea of mnemonic pegs (as in Schama 1995, Nora 1989, Basso 1996 or Stewart and Strathern 2003). Other theorists have gone much further in querying the relationship between place and time. We have seen that cultural geographers like Massey advocate thinking about space as a social process (1994: 155). Massey further describes space and time as an interweaving, the result of interrelations, not occurring *in* space and time, but relationships themselves *defining* space and time (Massey 1994:263).⁷

In a similar vein, De Certeau and Giard suggest that '*stories make, organize and link places. They are spatial trajectories*' (De Certeau and Giard 1998:115). It is certainly possible to see '*a landscape [as] ... the most solid appearance in which a history can declare itself*' (Ingليس in Ingold 2000: 198) and '*every object [as] ... a collapsed act*'

⁷ Archaeologists like Chris Gosden or Barbara Bender have argued further that concepts of time and space implicate each other (Bender 2002: S106). Following Heidegger, Gosden sees time as a product of consciousness, a process and structure of movement (Gosden 1994: 112). Gosden asks how time is socially created, how habit and thought relate and whether there is in fact a distinction between the two. He argues that all practice produces time, so there are as many forms of time as there are of practice (Gosden 1994: 125). In his 'Rhythmanalysis', Lefebvre has perhaps taken this idea furthest, attempting to think space and time together and make rhythm a mode of analysis (Lefebvre 2004).

(Ingold 2000: 198). Ingold advocates this view as a way of counteracting the perspective that modern people are *in* history and indigenous people are *in* nature (Ingold 2000: 139). He proposes instead seeing relationships to land (a.k.a landscape, places) as a historical process, and that the extent to which people have a common involvement with a place creates their likeness, their positionality (Ingold 2000: 148-9).

The difficulty with the suggestion that time is enplaced and places en-timed is that none of the theorists above explain how the two differ, if at all. Nor do they elaborate what *kind* of process landscape might be, if it is such. And yet, knowing that they are different dimensions is integral to everyday life. A person confusing the two would be unable to function physically, communicate or interact with others who clearly differentiate the two.

What the theorists discussed above do usefully is to rub around the edges of categories, to show that if place and time do not collapse into each other, they do interlock. In the case of post-socialist Eastern Europe, Verdery has discussed how a new way of writing history and counting time as well as accounting for relations to land as property and resignifying space e.g. by raising up and tearing down statues, go hand in hand (Verdery 1999: 35-40). We can say then that the timing of landscape is an aspect of how it is meaningful. While place is often made to stand for continuity (perpetual space, mnemonic pegs), this is not necessarily the case. Ethnographically, the connections and disconnections made between time and place vary greatly: from the Aborigine concept of Dreamtime to the land 'stalking people with stories', as Basso describes Western Apache ideas, to Harrison's account of people's attempts to help a too memorious landscape forget events (Harrison 2004). I deal with how these connections are made and broken in Toktogul in chapters 5 and 6, asking how and what people chose to commemorate, and how their 'chronopolitics' are connected or disconnected to places.

The idea of globalization itself also appears to have a particular temporal pattern: *'where once improvisation was snatched out of the glacial undertow of habitus, habitus now has to be painstakingly reinforced in the face of life-worlds that are frequently in flux'* (Appadurai 1990: 213). The idea of modernity as fact and project is closely allied to this sense of time (Appadurai 1996:1) and it may shape people's sense of places as more, or less, modern. Moving from place to place one can feel one is moving from 'time' to 'time', as if places were at different co-existing evolutionary stages (Fabian 1983:109-112). Certainly Soviet resettlement policies of nomads and enemy peoples to Central Asia suggests that moving people went along with initiating a new era, and erasing what went before. Whether

the assumption that moving people undermines their hold on the past holds true in the case of flooding the Toktogul valley, is one of the issues I will address in chapters 5 and 6. Clearly such ideas and practices have a direct bearing on people's sense of personhood, and of 'the good life'.

Moral Geographies

I found it impossible to talk about 'the good life' with people in Toktogul without talking about being a happy person, as well as a good person. People often called this *jakshylyk*: goodness. In English, the term 'moral' implies actions that are *right*, but not necessarily pleasant. Indeed 'being moral' may imply the opposite. This is certainly the predominant sense in which ethnographies of morality have tended to portray people's lives in the post-Soviet region (Wanner 2005, Humphrey and Mandel 2002, Beyer 2010, Riles 2002, Kharkhordin 1999). I propose the term 'moral geographies' to describe the sense of the value of hydro-electric dams, pastures, *mazars*, villages and cities people held in relation to their own lives. I intend 'moral geographies' to preserve the ambiguity of 'goodness' as virtue, and as happiness. I also invoke the other sense of 'moral' as a noun, as meaning, message and lessons that places *are*. The term 'geography' is useful in implying links to places, orientations and relationships between places. On the other hand, it harbours the dangers of seeming static or too map-like. On the positive side, the term 'moral geography' invokes parallels to 'moral economy', a term coined by Thompson (1971) and elaborated by James Scott and others to denote a wider idea of economy than one driven by the self-interested individual of neo-classical economics. Just like moral economies, moral geographies are not 'flat' space-like terrains, but inflected with the desires and obligations that people feel towards others.⁸

By 'morality' I do not mean a set of rules that people follow or break, but the choices people make in light of their perspectives on what is valuable about places, the past and future, their work or how to celebrate people and places (Howell 1996: 4).⁹ How is it that *mazars* are places where good behaviour and faith is rewarded with blessings and well-being?

⁸ I am not the first to use the term, cf. Helgason and Palsson 1997, Smith 2000, Thomas 2002, Rasmussen 2008.

⁹ This is an ethnography of people's ideas of personhood and *jakshylyk* in relation to particular places. It is not a comprehensive overview of moral pre-occupations. I have not written extensively for example on debates over alcohol, bride-abduction, corruption or the role of the state.

How is it that *jailoos* are praised so highly, and that people might comment ‘*only good women go to the jailoo*’? I focus most explicitly on happiness, Toktogul-style, in chapter eight, arguing that the subject has been much neglected in anthropology and the social sciences. I seek out local definitions and experiences of joy, pleasure, happiness, value and beauty. What is it about places like *mazars* and the Toktogul dam that arouse such strong feelings?

In dealing with the link between language (for example in the form of song, poetry, oral histories), emotions, morality and land, this thesis is closely related to Keith Basso’s work on Western Apache language and land as symbolic resources (Basso 1984: 23). ‘*With words, a massive physical presence is fashioned into a meaningful human universe.*’...‘*Elsewhere, hearing that mountain’s name, I see it. Its name is like a picture. Stories go to work on you like arrows. Stories make you live right. Stories make you replace yourself.*’ (Basso 1984: 19 and 22). Basso treats land as a tool for the imagination, instruments of thought, mnemonic pegs anchored between language and place that endure when the grandmother who told the story has passed on. He thus treats places as social constructions, and studies how they are represented in language (Basso 1996: 73-4). Where my approach differs is in arguing that specific places allow particular ideas and practices to flourish, in taking fuller account of what places *do*.¹⁰

This thesis relies a lot on language, what people say, sing, recite and write about places. Toktogul is well known for its poets and musicians, and poets from Toktogul are quite powerful in the Kyrgyz Writers’ Union. However, many of the poems and songs I collected are not by people who think of themselves as poets. They do not all know each other or interact closely. Each has a distinctive voice, and yet it seems clear that there are conventions about poetry and art they all orient towards. I will discuss these fully in chapter 8.

Many people insisted to me on the importance of proverbs (*makal-lakaptar*) in understanding people’s ideas and values.¹¹ These are considered traditional, which is not to say they may not have been coined as Communist slogans in literacy campaigns, for example.

As well as the many informal conversations of participant-observation, I conducted a number of interviews (31 of them recorded), often concentrating on people’s biographies and reminiscences of the past. I see these as a kind of oral history that gives a dignified voice to

¹⁰ Although I work with language, I do not intend a Kyrgyz ‘theory of language’.

¹¹ I am particularly grateful to Baktygul Tulebaeva, Zemfira Inogamova, Aksana Ismailbekova and Elmira Köchümkulova for discussing these proverbs with me.

those who are not necessarily the authoritative, recognized tellers of ‘History’ (cf. Thompson 2000: 21) I did not provide recordings of interviews to respondents, because there was usually no way to play it back in the household. Instead, people were usually keen to have their voice and mine played back to them straight away. In people’s accounts of the past, I stopped looking for factual details, and became interested in ‘*the myths we live by*’. I deal with these in particular in chapters five and six.

It is possible to read this thesis in terms of ‘identity’. Ubiquitous as the term is, I do not find that it engages interesting questions, or that it is analytically acute. ‘Identity’ covers a whole range of concepts including self-understanding, group cohesion, connectedness, categorization, self-representation and so on (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 8 and 20). To avoid these conflations, I speak instead of personhood, emotions and ideas in relation to places.

Appadurai, Massey, Ingold and Latour: in how far can I use each perspective to make sense of people’s relationships with towns and villages, dams, pastures and sites of pilgrimage in the Toktogul valley? How can an investigation of these places in turn speak to theory? One of the sources of difference between the theorists I dealt with here is that their ideas work to critique different things: seeing place as a social construct or performance foregrounds power relations that are otherwise attributed to a place such as a national territory. In their different ways, Ingold’s dwelling perspective on landscape as interaction and Latour’s idea of a ‘modern’ constitution argue against the premise that the world is divided into humans and non-humans. Particularly Latour argues for taking the *thingyness* of the world into account. The debate around the primacy of place or space in turn again highlights power relations, particularly those projected by capitalist models of the world. Each analytical perspective has political consequences. Latour’s demand to give voice to what were hitherto known as objects, is particularly challenging to an ethnographer who is only equipped to deal with human interlocutors. Since ‘mute’ and static places are as particular as ‘neutral’ space, I think this perspective valuable, even if I have not found the tools to live up to it.

Since each of the approaches discussed has its merits, and each seems to grasp something of the world, I endeavour to hold all these perspectives in view, drawing on them whenever they make sense of a piece of ethnography. As for the issue of terminology, I consider place as the entity that simply answers to the question ‘where’. I suggest attaching space/landscape/environment and nature to this as adjectives for describing bits of world and

interactions with it, including perception. Places can thus have space-like or nature-ish qualities.

Conditions of Knowing

In the following section, I discuss my fieldwork position at some length for three reasons: firstly, laying these conditions of knowing open to scrutiny allows for an informed critique of my conclusions. Second, since part of my argument is that knowledge of places is embodied and situated, I must be a body somewhere in the landscape too. I will return to this body whenever it is necessary to discuss my positioning. Thirdly, including myself as an object of investigation steers against the inclination of any ethnography to other or distance the people being talked about.

I came to know Bel Aldy first through a chance encounter with a locally influential Toktogul man now living in Bishkek, who decided my presence would be beneficial to his natal village. I then came to live with Tolkunbek and Raima, his political allies. Tolkunbek is well off but not the richest farmer in the village. He sits on the village council committee. Though clearly patronized by one political faction in the village, I did not feel unable to move between different host families, or spread my networks beyond obvious 'friends'. Had I come to fieldwork by another route, no doubt other elements of life would have been more easily revealed to me, and others more hidden.

My relationship with host families such as Raima and Tolkunbek shifted between being guest scientist and adopted daughter. In consequence, the rights, expectations and amount of influence over what happened that I felt I had frequently shifted. I learnt to dress, act and work - more or less competently - as a daughter or young *kelin* (daughter-in-law). I was also asked to teach English at the local school and anthropology at the American University in Bishkek, and so carried the status of these occupations with me too. The fact that I had a husband but no child and was travelling alone in my late twenties and early thirties was a cause of concern for many of my friends.

One thing that I found distressing is that having consulted with colleagues on the issue; I introduced myself as a married woman, although I was not legally married to my long-term partner in Europe. I found I need not have worried as much as I did about being

accepted and safe without being officially married, or about the dissimulation.¹² Legally binding or not, I introduced my mother-in-law and other close relatives to people in Toktogul. This helped establish me as a real person, anchored in relationships. So did my participation and grief at funerals of people we all knew.¹³

I clearly looked to most people around Toktogul like an urban person, braving a life without running water. Though this is not an urban ethnography, yet it is sometimes an ethnography of rural-urban relations. Bishkek or towns such as Toktogul and Kara Kul appear as an idea and point of comparison just beyond the horizon, and as an everyday experience, like Raima and Nurik's visit to Bishkek. I will return to these important distinctions and the idea of 'distance' people made between rurality and urbanity in types of work and place in chapters 3 and 6. I hope the fact that Raima and Nurik were travelling *with* me between Bishkek and Bel Aldy dislodges the assumption that the anthropologist travels and the objects of study stay in place.¹⁴ Passaro has described the implicit expectations and judgment of a 'good' field site as creating 'village epistemologies': a good field site should be as other as possible, typically a village that looks something like a knowable, 'controlled' environment (Passaro 1997: 147 and 150). But if my object of study is *places*, it is not a *village*. Paying attention to the links between such well-rehearsed 'opposites' as city and country, or more bizarrely, dams, pastures and holy sites, hopefully undermines such a 'village epistemology' or the 'sedentarist metaphysic' that Malkki critiques, i.e. the assumption that culture has 'roots' (Malkki 1995: 15).

Since Central Asians are rather used to discrimination, particularly as migrant workers in Russia, I found I had to work against my 'high' and 'alien' status as a European. Further, since Britain was engaged in a war against fellow Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq during my stay, I was quite often treated as an extension of my government(s) and the representative

¹² Abu-Lughod speaks of a similar situation and unease about inauthenticity and presenting an incomplete persona to people during fieldwork (1999: 18)

¹³ It is likely that my frequent encounters with death during fieldwork, for example a young neighbour's suicide and suffering a brain injury myself in Kyrgyzstan, have shaped what I thought and write about, though I cannot specify how.

¹⁴ This is not to say Raima's opportunities to travel were not more limited than for her adoptive daughter. With one exception, none of my Central Asian colleagues set out to study groups other than their own. The opportunities, financial means, institutional and personal authority available to me are not the same for scholars based and educated in Kyrgyzstan. This situation also continues a Soviet pattern of Russians studying all kinds of people, while 'all kinds of people' were expected to study themselves: Jews studying Jews, Armenians Armenians and so on.

of ‘the West’, to be admired or criticized. For all these reasons, I spoke Kyrgyz rather than Russian whenever possible. Because people had no negative associations, indeed knew very little about Scotland, I usually introduced myself as Scottish rather than British or German, although by Kyrgyz reckoning I would be at least half, if not fully German by my father.¹⁵ This made me personally more comfortable, but presenting myself as an unknown in this sense is likely to have bred insecurity in the people I met as well. I sometimes avoided describing myself as an *etnograf* and instead called myself a *soziolog* or *istorik* (historian), since I found people felt less objectified by such a profession, not associating ‘measuring heads’ or defining ethnic groups with them. Since the issues in this thesis were raised at the intersection between my European life experience and that of my Kyrgyz interlocutors, I occasionally explicitly compare my previous experience of place and history in locations such as the Scottish Highlands, Warsaw and Berlin. This back and forth between distance and proximity, in fieldwork as in writing, is an indissoluble tension, but hopefully a creative one.

Everybody’s life goes beyond a thesis text. Therefore, I aim to always give the reader a little more information about actors than is necessary for the argument. The same is true for the photographs: they are not solely illustrations buttressing my discussion, but provide a way of telling other possible stories. I have maintained all original place names, but apart from the people who identified themselves in the public domain with their own publications, I have used pseudonyms and maintained anonymity in the photographs. I offered anonymity in formal interviews and it is not always clear when people wanted this anonymity lifted. In a politically volatile situation, I cannot be sure that what is inoffensive now, may still be so in five years time. Anonymity also allows me to show more concretely how the people in these pages relate to each other and to me.

¹⁵ I will discuss relevant ideas of kinship and belonging fully in chapter 5.

Thesis Structure

The thesis consists of three sections, three different angles on place. The first is ‘full-frontal’, the other two sections sit at an angle. Section I deals with summer pastures (chapter 2), with Toktogul hydropower (chapter 3), and finally with *mazars* (chapter 4). In each of these chapters, I follow three lines of enquiry: first, how these places come to be known in different ways, their ‘economies of knowledge’. Second, I ask after the role of each place in articulating the ‘good life’, imagined and realized through these places. Thirdly, I investigate in what sense each of these places can be thought to have agency, to affect how people interact and think about them.

Section II addresses people’s sense of time and place. How are time and the relationship between past and future conceived? What are accounts of the past for, how and when does the past appear in the present, and how is it understood to be connected to places? In chapter 5 I concentrate on how people value continuities through epics and genealogies as well as storied places. I ask further how people connect their own life stories to grand narratives such as genealogies, but also to the idea of becoming cultured. In chapter 6 I concentrate on the recent Soviet past, and ask what role nostalgic modes of telling play, and how people conceive of change: who causes history to happen? Section III deals with activities central to the good life, namely working (chapter 7) and enjoying places through poetry, song and celebration (chapter 8). Though I have divided work and enjoyment by chapters, I hope the actual content of the chapters will undermine this institutionalized opposition.

Section I: Interactions in Three Significant Places

Mountain pastures, hydroelectric dams, pilgrimage sites: what is the rationale for drawing such disparate places together? Is there anything that they can tell us about concepts of place? This section investigates the significance of particular kinds of places that were singled out as special by many people I spoke to, namely *mazars*, the Toktogul dams and *jailoos*. I came to know these places very differently: I lived for months on *jailoos* and in the village Bel Aldy, visited dams and dam-workers half a dozen times, *mazars* a dozen times. Most of these visits were not in winter, since it becomes very hard to travel then, and almost impossible to reach *jailoos*.

In some ways, all three places dealt with here are *not* everyday places: they are all outstanding, not entirely mundane. I will address village life, relations with the *raion* (Russian: district) centre, capital city or the near and far abroad more extensively in Section II. In each type of place, I discuss firstly different “economies of knowledge”, secondly the role of these places in articulating the ‘good life’ and thirdly, how the agency of these places is conceived. Clearly all three points of discussion affect each other. Drawing on Appadurai’s work, I will consider whether Kyrgyz dams are modernist ‘spaces’ or ‘places’. In discussing the ownership relations of *jailoo*, dams and *mazars*, I will address whether these senses of ownership presume ‘neutral’ spaces or not. I argue that ownership, and the agency exerted by state actors and inhabitants mean quite different things in each type of place, because of their different material and social characteristics.

In discussing the role of places in the ‘good life’, I draw on Keith Basso’s writing. I further relate Kyrgyz relations to places to Massey and Latour’s recasting of the concept of agency and place. How is the effectiveness of a *mazar* different from the effectiveness of a dam or *jailoo*? When and how can places be active agents rather than a passive backdrop or human construct? If they have power, what kind of power, what kind of subject-objects are we talking about? The first section on pastures discusses economies of knowledge in greatest depth, the third section on *mazars* deals most intensively with the question of agency. The conclusion serves to relate all three places and theoretical points of focus.



Figure 5: Toktogul valley

(map: Kyrgyz Cartographic Agency 1995, labels author's own)

I found *jailoos*, dams and *mazars* were all the subject of a great deal of emotional investment. All three play a role in how Toktogul residents strive to shape a good life. However, as I intimated in the introduction, this did not mean that people spoke *about* these places all the time. People discussed these places most expansively a) in answering an ignorant and curious ethnographer's questions b) in praise poetry and songs (see chapter 8) and c) in relation to friction or debates around these places as to their role, value, and what they required of people.

I discuss scholarly and official policy or public debates in relation to managing *jailoos*, dams and *mazars* because these stately, scholarly and public forms of knowing and interacting affect people's opportunities and choices in whether or not to take livestock to high pastures, whether or not to visit a *mazar* as a proper Muslim and so on. I will flag up where I see these debates as influential, although the *channels* of this influence are rarely explicit, and rarely traceable for me here. To draw the parameters of scholarly and policy-oriented talk about *jailoos*, dams and *mazars*, I critically review the literature on each. I use

ethnographic episodes to give space to everyday and individual interactions and understandings of these places. In both literature review and ethnography, I pay attention to the vocabulary used in relation to these places. Points of contact between these forms of knowledge usefully highlight their conjunctions and differences: knowing by observing, measuring, law-making, living with or celebrating in artistic form.¹⁶ One striking difference in these kinds of knowing (apart from their varying *form*) is the claim of most environmental, developmental and governmental actors that pasture degradation is a severe problem, a claim many pasture users deny. I will show that this is only one among a whole set of differences in perspectives between accounts of pasture as economy, dams as politics, *mazars* as religion, and knowledge of these places as part of people's livelihoods and moral geographies. I argue that these frames also affect people's choices and interactions with *jailoos*, dams and *mazars*.

Relating three very different kinds of places allows me to draw out common elements of value between otherwise highly disparate places and discourses, such as the centrality of water and *tazalyk*. Let me start by taking you to a *jailoo* mountain pasture.

¹⁶ I will return to the last two forms (working and celebrating) in chapters 7 and 8.



Figure 6: Making cream in the early morning on Kashka Suu jailoo

Chapter 2: Knowing and Living Pastures

23rd May 2007

Animals softly thud past my tent, lowing. It is six o'clock and I could do with another doze. But the muted sounds outside tell me that Saikal Apa is pulling the calves out of their night-shelter and preparing the milking.¹⁷ 'Begimai! Nükö! Turgula!' Her raucous voice calls for her granddaughters to stir themselves and round up the cows. The girls are still asleep in the *boz üi* (literally 'grey/white house', yurt), along with the smaller children and their grandfather Sultanaly. I stir myself guiltily, and emerge into the morning chill to save Saikal's old bones some labour. The sky is clear, not having found its daytime blue yet. Behind the high white cliffs towering above the pasture, the sun will be rising.

We arrived at *Kashka Suu* ('clean water') *jailoo* with our retinue of helpers and baggage on horseback in early May. Sultanaly Ata and Saikal Apa have made this trip for twenty-five years, accompanied by several cohorts of grandchildren to cosset and feed fresh cream, who will be quick to obey their grandparents, collect firewood and tidy the *boz üi*. Our village neighbours arrived a few days before us; three other *boz üi*, each inhabited by an elderly widow and her young helpers, have settled on the banks of the stream tumbling down the white cliffs. The *boz üis* stand equally spaced, within easy shouting distance of each other, but not so near as to cause constant dogfights. Further uphill, herders need to keep wolves from attacking their animals by letting off shotguns, fireworks or lighting great bonfires in the evenings. Wolves are an expensive nuisance, no longer kept in check by Soviet helicopter hunts. In the meadow triangle between stream, riverbed and rising slopes stands an abandoned beekeeper's hut.

This is an easy-going *jailoo*: no one here is hiring out their services as a shepherd, caring for a flock of many hundreds. No one is milking mares every few hours to make *kymyz*, the national drink, which can be sold at a tidy profit. The horses and professional shepherds have moved to the highest pastures, leaving the tall grasses and attendant flies to tolerant cows. Unlike us, they will move from spring pastures to high altitude summer pastures and back down again in the autumn. With the exception of myself and a young man helping his elderly mother, we are a *jailoo* of elders and children.¹⁸ The generations in

¹⁷Apa: mother, respectful form of address for any elderly woman older than ego.

¹⁸I will introduce a larger *jailoo* populated by younger families and shepherds later. The differences in age make-up are simply the result of convenience (widows and elders not moving to very remote places) and of

between are looking after the fields around the village, or have found work in the city or abroad.

Saikal Apa and I pour the results of our milking into the iron wok (*kazan*) and light a fire of brushwood and logs in her mud-brick stove. Once the milk has cooled and Saikal Apa has put all the bits of the centrifuge together, I sit myself on a piece of old felt and turn its handle, watching the yellow cream and thin milk pour from its spouts into different buckets. Mopping up drips, feeding in more warm milk and learning vocabulary from my exercise book, I will watch sunlight creep down the high grassy slopes beyond the river. The cows are giving much milk at this time of year; the pasture is at its best: the grass is not the watery thin stuff of March and April that can actually make livestock lose weight, but something more nourishing that has not yet been trampled or spoilt by dung. Every week the vegetation changes, from yellow roses and purple geraniums to tall marjoram and white candle flowers.

This chapter investigates why people like Saikal Apa seek out mountain pastures, what their economic rationale is, and what other reasons there are for *jailoos* being a highly valued place and part of people's lives. I enquire into the differences and conjunctions of how Saikal Apa knows and understands the pastoral life, and how inner Asian pastoralism has been discussed in the academic and policy-oriented literature. I discuss the historical and political context of present practices: in how far are there continuities with pre-Soviet and Soviet pastoral techniques and ways of life? The account I give is interspersed with extracts from *jailoo* life, which I will resume in the chapter on work.

I argue that the kind of analyses commonly made of *jailoos* as part of the rural economy and 'sustainability' do not fully grasp the value and importance of pastures to users like Saikal. Rather than discussing the *jailoo* in purely economic terms, I suggest conceiving of this place as a crucial part of a moral economy and further, a moral geography. As part of moral geographies, the economic role of *jailoos* becomes one factor among many in good living, more broadly conceived. This move allows me to foreground elements of value such as health, wealth, *tazalyk* and a sense of belonging as 'Kyrgyzzness' that can be closely allied to state-led ethnic nationalism.

Although an academic thesis is clearly quite close to the knowledge-making practices of development-driven reports, the research practice informing it is rather different. I present

generational 'turn-over': when Aliman Apa and Sultanaly Ata stopped going to the *jailoo* in 2009, younger family members took their place.

some of the knowledge generated particularly by geographers and economists on Kyrgyz pastures, and then compare it to my own vein of analysis. Though this sounds quite tidy, it is in fact a rather messy interaction: like other authors, I am informed by my own experiences, *jailoo* users and the literature. I feel justified in holding these forms of knowledge apart because they are treated as distinct by actors themselves, and they also have distinctly different agencies, political resources and leverage. The strength of anthropological fieldwork lies in combining observation and mimesis, going through a similar process of learning that young members of a pastoral family might (Dilley 1999:34).¹⁹ This means that fieldwork allows learning both propositional (*knowing that*) and non-propositional (*knowing how*) knowledge (Riles in Harris 2007:3). Although many other social scientists spend time talking to and living with herders, the lived experience has little legitimacy in the kind of academic writing that most social science allows for. I will here draw on the strengths of ethnography to convey lived experience, particularly individual and complex social interactions and emotions in relation to mountain pastures. This stance is also a theoretical claim in that it foregrounds experience of the world as a source of propositional knowledge, rather than seeing the latter as an insurmountable lens for the former.

I allow different ways of knowing how to manage pastures, how best to live in rural Kyrgyzstan, which do not usually recognize each other very clearly or consistently, to be co-present. I discuss the knowledge production on pastures in order to add to the quality of development-oriented approaches rather than deny their relevance.²⁰ Herders do not act in isolation; they make choices in the framework of policy and power structures. In the case of Inner Mongolia, Williams argues that the perspectives of different knowledge making groups like natural and social scientists, Han Chinese and ethnic Mongols together might allow for incremental objectivity, but that they are kept apart by a host of boundaries, which contribute to further pasture degradation (Williams 2000: 503). According to Williams, non-local representations of nature are privileged by policy-makers and allow Chinese scientists and government agents to dominate Mongol herders and ultimately colonize Inner Mongolia, settling a more 'progressive' Han population and imposing assimilation. International scholars are complicit in this by bolstering, lending weight to the Chinese natural scientists' perspective where local 'ignorant' Mongols are blamed for degradation

¹⁹ The metaphor of ethnographer as child should not be overdrawn, the comparison limps a lot in other respects.

²⁰ I deal primarily with English-language scholarship here, because this thesis addresses an English-speaking audience. A primarily Russian- and Kyrgyz-speaking audience would require a different kind of critique.

(Williams 2000: 510-3). As I will show below, though there is less tension along ethnic lines on looking after pastures in Kyrgyzstan, ideas of ethnicity do mediate between national institutions and government actors and pasture users. It will also become evident that this ‘bridge’ does not allow international agencies to relinquish a narrowly economic and environmental analysis of pastures.

One reason pastures have attracted so much research is that they represent a very large proportion of Kyrgyz territory (figures between 44 and 80 % are cited), and thus basis of livelihoods. Over 60 % of the population live in the countryside (though as we shall see not all the rural population depends on pastures, nor do city people necessarily *not* depend on pastures) and about 30 % of the country’s GDP derives from livestock husbandry.²¹ Seasonal transhumance across vast grasslands is a phenomenon not singular to Kyrgyzstan, but common to much of Inner Asia including Kazakhstan, Mongolia and the Himalayas. Of course, livestock herding in some form is known to most other areas of the world, from East Africa to South America and Northern Europe. What is specific about pastoral Inner Asia is that in the past, livestock were the primary source of food, and that much of the population practiced mobile herding over quite large distances.

Even before Genghis Khan’s conquests, Russians, Europeans and Chinese wrote of Inner Asian nomads as a superlatively mobile military threat to sedentary neighbours (cf. Shahrani 2001, Sneath 2000). The origins of pastoralism have also attracted much attention: did this way of life evolve from hunting and gathering, from agriculturalists or did it evolve before agriculture (Vainshtein 1980)? The fearsome mobility of nomads was attacked in the Soviet era as ‘backward’ although new forms of mobility (motorized, centrally coordinated rather than carried out with kin and allies) continued to be indispensable to Soviet livestock herding. Unlike chicken and pig farming, nobody has come up with an intensive, industrial way of raising sheep, goats and horses, which in the Inner Asian topography involves driving them to seasonal pastures.

More recently, the figure of the ‘free nomad’ has made mobile herding the object of admiration and pride by local and international activists, researchers and tourists. Seeking nomads, natural beauty and environmental concerns were certainly factors in my decision to work in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz people, whether urban or rural, often claim ‘we are nomads at

²¹ GDP estimate and low estimate on territory from CIA Factbook 2010, high estimate from Japarov et.al. 2000. The GDP does not take into account the crucial role in subsistence provisioning that livestock products represent.

heart'. This can be offered as a statement of pride, or a slightly apologetic explanation for 'uncivilized' behaviour.²² As I will discuss here, this conjunction of essentializing Kyrgyzzness as nomadic is neither equivalent to, nor unrelated to the way transhumant herders themselves consider their way of life. In the following discussion I explore how mobile pastoralism and the vast grasslands of Kyrgyzstan are thought of and what people do *in* or with them. From a policy- and often associated academic point of view, this question is often framed as 'what *should* they do with them'? I begin by examining how pastures are defined and thought of as a *type* of place, and what kind of life, what kinds of people are associated with them.

What is a Mountain Pasture?

One striking thing about Kyrgyz mountains is that for those who live in them, it is usually not the mountain peaks marked on official maps that are named and relevant, but the inhabited pastures and routes in between. Mountains have names in so far as they are part of people's lives: a mountain flank may be a pasture, a dangerous cliff or a pass to be negotiated. These will be named. But the peak, as a special place of reference for cartographers and mountaineers, often is not. Though certain named mountains are considered holy such as Khan Tengri or Suleiman Too, it is the whole mountain rather than the peak that the name denotes.²³ Being 'in or on the mountains' (*toodo*) in Kyrgyz more often implies being on a pasture or perhaps in a national park rather than a peak. Indeed, when people speak of migrating to or visiting high pastures, they simply say '*men toogo baram*': 'I'm going to the mountains'. Poets tend to speak of generic *toolor* as a type of place, unless they are addressing a very local audience and extol a particular place, when they might refer to particular mountain pastures (cf. chapter 8).

The most general word for pasture is *jaiyt*, literally 'grazing', but this is rarely used in everyday speech. Nor is there a Kyrgyz common word for 'pastoralism': the literature on the

²² Like hunter-gatherers, nomadic peoples tend to be defined in scholarship in a materialist vein (akin to Marxism in this sense), taking their economic activities as the 'cause' of mindsets.

²³ Like a string of patrilineal ancestors, these are sometimes known as 'seven fathers' (*jeti ata*) (Bunn 2004: 63-4). A similar link between ancestor spirits and mountains has been noted in Mongolia (Humphrey 2004) and in Tibet (Buffetrille 1996). At the time of my fieldwork in the Toktogul area however, these links were not made.

topic is usually in Russian and speaks of *pastbishche*.²⁴ When speaking about the way of life of their ancestors, people speak of ‘nomads’, literally ‘moving people’ (*köchmөndör*). As mentioned earlier, although there are many words for different kinds of pastures, people used *jailoo* mostly to mean any pasture some distance from settlements. Jacquesson has shown how *syrt* pastures (literally ‘beyond’, ‘back’) are anthropomorphized, in the sense that they become places in relation to human ideas, needs and practices. Early Russian explorers like Semenov, Valikhanov and Severtsov agreed with the Kyrgyz description of the heights to the south of Yssyk-Kul not as a series of peaks, but as a series of high valleys and pastures called *syrt* (Jacquesson 2003: 130). So in the way places are named and language is used, we have evidence that in most everyday contexts, the mountains *are* pastures. Since mountains are understood primarily as the pastures where people live in the summer, they are also not thought of primarily as ‘wild’.²⁵

After helping Saikal Apa with the tasks of the dairy, the children go off to build a dam on the stream. I duck through the wooden doorframe into the *boz üi* to clean up the mess. The girls have already piled the cotton mattresses, covered in velvet appliqué designs or goatskins, in a neat wall at the back of the *boz üi*. I take off my rubber slippers and step onto the worn *shyrdak*, a brightly coloured felt carpet that Saikal Apa made with her daughters-in-law. I begin at the back, sweeping crumbs, bits of paper, dust and sweet wrappings towards the door. The discarded bits of clothing get stuffed into one of the large Chinese travel bags hanging from the *boz üi* walls. The cutlery goes onto the sideboard, on the women's side of the *boz üi*, to the right of the doorway.²⁶ The petroleum lamp has already found its place with the horse tack on the left, the men's side. I unfold the plastic tablecloth in the middle of the room, and place mats around it. Breaking the heavy *nan* bread into pieces on the cloth, I see the batch will not last the day: we'll have to bake some loaves this afternoon. Sugar, cream and yoghurt, bowls and teaspoons are distributed for the meal. I slip back into my shoes to open the *boz üi*'s roof wide, now that the sunlight is rapidly sliding towards us across the valley. I circle the *boz üi*, finding the right rope to pull the ceiling flap wide open. A *boz üi*

²⁴ It is possible to translate pastoralism as *malchylyk turmush* (literally ‘herding way of life’), but this is a recent term of scholars wishing to write in Kyrgyz, not a term commonly used by herders.

²⁵ ‘Wild’ (*japaiy*) in Kyrgyz has quite negative connotations of uncivilized, rude or ferocious behaviour. It may have become so as the equivalent of the Russian ‘*dikii*’, which Kyrgyz sometimes use as a derogatory term to describe themselves (seriously as well as jokingly) as uncultivated.

²⁶ See also Bunn 2000 on the *boz üi* as a living space.

consists of red wooden lattice walls that are easily folded for transport. Set in a circle, they support the slim roof beams, 40 or so fitting into the roof wheel, the *tündük* which features on the Kyrgyz flag. The worn red frame is covered in large grey felts, tied down to the lattice walls. Saikal Apa's colourful wall hanging (*tush kiiiz*) is suspended at the back of the *boz üü*, disguising the pile of bedding and clothes against which guests, or the most senior members of the household, rest their backs.



Figure 7: The bedding is tidied away and breakfast laid

Sultanaly Ata is keeping out of the way, sitting on the saddles piled against the *boz üi* outside. He is taking his first portion of snuff. I have never seen him without his long synthetic leather boots, but that's just because I don't sleep in the *boz üi* with everyone, but rather in a small synthetic tent alongside. Like Saikal Apa, he wears rubber galoshes on top of the soft boots outdoors. Has he slept well? I ask. '*Eeh, I was in and out all night. My back hurts. Well, everybody gets old one day.*' He is eighty-two and likes to potter in his smithy back in the village. Saikal used to help him when he was one of the *kolkhoz* (collective farm) smiths, travelling across country to forge new bits for broken ploughs and stovepipes. He makes tightening saddle girths and chopping firewood look easy. Next week we are all going to his grandson's wedding in the capital, Bishkek. I ask him whether he likes the city, but he dismissively flicks his head: '*No, it's boring. You just sit at home and watch television. You don't know anyone.*' Saikal Apa on the other hand is looking forward to a bit of a rest at her rich son's house.²⁷ Nevertheless, she was impatient to get away to the *jailoo* back in May. '*Bul taza*' it is clean and healthy, she said. When the milk has been processed, the centrifuge washed and stored, the yoghurt set and yesterday's left to drain off whey, the old people settle for an afternoon nap.

Though *jailoos* may be several hours ride from the nearest village and road, life here is often less isolated than in the snow-bound winter months in the village. City grandchildren and other relatives come to help, enjoy the *jailoo* and grow strong. Most days one can invite passers-by and acquaintances in for a bowl of *kymyz* and to exchange news. Village neighbours come to check on their animals, to bring supplies or pick up some butter, to hunt or to pick raspberries. Some areas offer home stays to tourists. When Saikal Apa is waiting impatiently to move to the *jailoo*, and when poets sing of the gifts of the mountains, these are also yearnings for the summer season, for a particular kind of life associated both with a period of the year as well as a place. However, some rural and city dwellers never have the opportunity to visit mountain meadows, and not all of them like the idea. It is important to note that the pastures are largely the preserve of ethnic Kyrgyz. Those Uzbeks, Koreans or Russians who venture into the mountains go to work in bee keeping, forestry, mining or to national parks for a rest, like some of their urban Kyrgyz neighbours. I will expand on the *jailoos* as places of 'Kyrgyzness' and *tazalyk* below, but now turn to scholarly and policy-led perspectives on pastures.

²⁷ Saikal Apa and Sultanaly Ata have more to say in chapter 5.

Pastures as Economic Spheres

In contrast to Saikal Apa's sense of abundant pastures, most environment, development and government agencies see pastures as severely misused and degraded, a claim many pasture users deny.²⁸ Scholars connected with such policy-makers increasingly debate whether indigenous pastoralist practices were, or are, more sustainable or environmentally friendly than capitalist ranching or Soviet collective livestock farms (Liechti 2008, Kerven 2004, Humphrey and Sneath 1996 and 1999, Williams 2000). These questions are also connected to current nation-building trends among Inner Asian intellectuals, politicians and media and to the environmental concerns of foreign funding bodies and tourists (Vitebsky 1995: 191, Humphrey and Sneath 1996: 8).

Most English-language studies of pastures in Kyrgyzstan are by human geographers and economists, frequently supported by development-orientated funders such as UNDP. They are therefore largely concerned with identifying and solving problems in the access and management of resources.²⁹ The aim of these studies is to contribute knowledge that will help alleviate poverty (identified as not having enough pasture and livestock or jobs, in short: income) while avoiding pasture degradation.³⁰ They are concerned with state-led reform, even if they have an ethic and methodology of listening (in data gathering) to what pasture users and citizens have to say. A small excerpt usefully highlights the focus and tone of these studies:

²⁸ Note that the 'science' of pastoralism is not homogenous: there are significant differences in the positions of foreign researchers and funding bodies, national agencies and national NGOs. There is also a large difference (not necessarily in personnel) between Soviet pastoral science and the post-Soviet variety. Finke notes that most herders in Western Mongolia also deny pasture degradation in the 1990s, except around villages or wells. He notes that ethnic Mongols were more critical than Kazaks (Finke 2004: 200). Humphrey and Sneath (1999:46) also record Mongol herders being very aware of degradation, and blaming a lack of mobility. Exploring the full reasons for these differences in assessing pasture await a future research project.

²⁹ To reiterate, this critique is aimed at English language publications. Certainly Kyrgyz ethnographers like Abramzon (1971) or Japarov (2005) do not describe pastures primarily in economic terms.

³⁰ Examples of this approach include Bichsel et.al. 2008 (part funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation), Schmidt 2006, Dörre 2008 (both funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung), Yoshida 1999, Farrington 2005, Schillhorn van der Veen 1995, Kerven 2004 (part funded by DFID), Sitianski 1998 (in Russian).

'According to a UNDP pasture assessment in the Suusamir valley ... summer pastures are rarely used and tend to degradation due to underutilization, while near village and intensive pastures show signs of overgrazing. Combining livestock and a rotationary crop-hay-vegetables agriculture is seen as an important diversification strategy in order to decrease a household's vulnerability towards price fluctuations, animal diseases and other risks. Besides old-age pensions, this combination of livestock and vegetable production and sale is an additional, secondary income and is invested into children's education. '

(Steimann and Weibel 2006)

The extract mixes sources of information and authority: while knowledge of household strategies presumably derives from talking to people, the statement that close pastures are over-used and far pastures under-used is likely to be a result of vegetation surveys rather than questionnaires. The inhabitants of Suusamir are thus implicitly blamed for damaging pastures, damage of which they are not aware.³¹ The justified concern with economic hardship occludes other aspects of the choices people make about utilizing pastures - or interacting with them more broadly, and not necessarily as an economic resource.³² While the picture of households combining income-generating strategies is certainly accurate, it is cast in a purely economic frame that carries certain silent assumptions: that all humans are rational actors with similar aims that are played out in a sphere defined as 'economic'.³³

³¹ The ignorance of farmers as a major cause of poverty and mismanagement is also cited in the influential World Bank report on the livestock sector (2007). The 'creation of ignorance' by positing development actors as the knowers, those to be developed as the known is critiqued by authors such as Escobar (1995), Hobart (1995), Marglin and Marglin (1996).

³² Bunn notes a similar 'zoning' in Soviet-era ethnographers studying *either* the totemic aspect of Kyrgyz relations to animals, *or* socio-economic aspects of herding and hunting (Bunn 2000: 215). A study that combines anthropology and geography to inform government and developmental policy on environment and poverty under a broader appreciation of cultural factors as well as a post-socialist economic structures is Humphrey and Sneath's 'End of Nomadism' (1999).

³³ Several studies do contextualize actors' decision-making particularly in relation to power structures and opportunities (Steimann 2009, Liechti 2008, Dörre 2008). Liechti argues that meaningful spaces are constructed, ideas frequently shared within a certain social group. Where our approaches differ is that I attempt to follow actors' categories of understanding pastures, rather than constructing a universal list of actor perspectives that developers might need to consider in other areas of the world.

‘Economy’ is a normative term, implying certain kinds of persons and agency, implying individual rational actors driven by the desire to maximise profit (Dilley 1992: 2 and 10). Clearly this is a very impoverished model of human motivations and behaviour, a model that fails to do justice to *jailoo* users in more sense than one, as I will demonstrate. Although the UNDP report is correct in assuming that Kyrgyz families want to be able to eat well and have a measure of security, it does not for example address preferences in how to go about work with whom, and what for. What *kind* of education, material goods or food do people want to acquire?

Thompson famously critiqued the view of humans as rational economic actors with the concept of moral economy that includes concepts of justice, for example a fair price of bread, how the economy can and should be regulated and by whom, as well as what kind of resistance is legitimate and effective (Thompson 1971, for applications of the idea of moral economy see also Scott 1985, Helgason and Palsson 1997, Hann 1998). In the Kyrgyz context, Sanghera discusses privatization and the transformation of work and income as a transformation in moral economy, with an emphasis on moral emotions (empathy, shame, commonly recognized obligations and rights) in decision-making (Sanghera 2006, 2008). I agree with Sanghera that in order to understand economic behaviour, it is necessary to understand the ethics, and the ideas of a good life that people strive for (Sanghera 2008: 2).

So far, I have argued that seeing *jailoos* purely in terms of economy is a bad idea because it is not *realistic*. Scott has further argued that such a narrow focus in policy-making (what he calls a ‘hegemonic planning mentality’) can also have very negative consequences in failing to take account of both local say-so and know-how. He warns of the dangers of such simplifications in particular if wielded by an authoritarian state, and cites the Soviet state as a prime example (Scott 1998: 5-6). Clearly in the current Central Asian political climate, these are not dangers of the past. The kinds of analyses produced by scholars linked to international funders like the UNDP or World Bank heavily influence both government policy-making and national NGOs.³⁴ Policies generated by these political documents impact on herders’ perspectives and situation, most forcefully through legal frameworks and pressure from village or higher level administrations. So far, the disjunction between government initiatives, legislation and pastoralist practices has been less damaging than in Inner Mongolia for two reasons: firstly, state actors are less effective in pursuing pasture management goals, and secondly, they are less ideologically distant from ex-nomads, as the

³⁴ On the dependence of local NGOs on foreign funders and the consequences see Jailobaeva forthcoming.

titular nationality. In the following section I examine the historic and political context of pasture use to explain the current transformation in relations between herders and state administrators. This explains in what circumstances pastures appear as resource, property or in other guises.

Keeping Livestock in an Extended Family

Upstream from Saikal Apa's *jailoo*, there is a high mountain valley called *Boor Teke* (wild goat slope) populated mostly by young families. I live here through the late summer of 2006 with Anvar and Elmira, their three young children and a hired shepherd. In the summer months Elmira and Anvar drive their sheep, goats, cows and horses to mountain pastures by horse. They grumble at the village council not finding the money to repair the Soviet-built track that would allow them to come by lorry. The herder's lot means living far from modern conveniences such as electricity, shops, roads and health services.

Eight years ago, Elmira was a very young housewife in the capital Bishkek, living in a newly built house while her husband Anvar travelled the ex-Soviet railway network as a train conductor. The decision to move back to their rural origins was a decision of Anvar's extended family, seeing livestock as an important and secure investment in the late 90s.³⁵ Their herd consists mostly of Anvar's mother's and three brothers' animals. They are lucky that Anvar's older brothers can afford to give them quite generous gifts of clothes, medicine and foods from the bazaar in return for their care of the livestock and the butter, cream, fermented mare's milk and meat they deliver.

Since collective farms of the Soviet type were very quickly abandoned under government pressure from the mid-90s, both individual families and state actors have been experimenting with other forms of collaboration and regulation, the place of kinship in the economy and in politics. As livestock was distributed to most farm workers and as a village birthright in the early to mid-90s, more families own a flock than before. City relatives also consider it a safe investment and cheap source of quality meat and dairy products. They often have herding arrangements with rural kin like Anvar and Elmira, conceived as both a duty and mutual help. All except the very poor and those with no remaining links to relatives in

³⁵ Amid the drain of rural areas of the most young and able seeking work in cities and abroad, there is still a counter-trend of those moving back to the village who find more access to resources, mutual aid and a cheaper life here than trying to survive in the city.

the countryside have livestock kept for them in this way.³⁶ Assessing who gives more or less in this exchange is a matter of great attention, and often the cause of resentment and disagreements. The herder has the right to use much of the produce of the animals in his care: *kymyz* and dairy products that can fetch a good price in the valley. If a monthly fee for each animal passes hands (unlikely between relatives), this arrangement is called *bada*. If the *badachi* is trusted with many animals and only a few fall prey to wolves, illness or accident (a question of watchfulness, experienced care and luck), then the herd can generate enough income to see the shepherd's family through the winter. These arrangements solve the problem of manpower for rich or absent families, and the problem of subsistence for some poor families. Certainly, these kinds of arrangements are known from the past and present, from Mongolia to Kyrgyz groups in Tajikistan (Sneath 2000: 45, Shahrani 2001:179, Abramzon 1971: 73). The poorest of the poor are those who are not even trusted by their own extended families to care for their animals, often because of a drinking habit.

Since the crash in livestock numbers of the mid-90s, when distant and even mid-range pastures were largely abandoned, they are now being gradually repopulated. Herding is not necessarily an unpopular or lonely life: being a shepherd spells employment, quality food and a life that is spared the frequency of alcoholism and livestock theft in the valley. In principle, people know livestock should be helped to go where they find food they like. This means one should go high and move often if one wants fat, healthy and hardy animals. But this knowledge conflicts with the constraints of human needs: wanting to be close to one's family and other business in the village, not being able to afford the time, man power or such resources as a horse and warm *boz üi* necessary for spending months at altitude. In consequence, the pastures close to the village are heavily burdened year-round by the livestock of the poorest. This of course means the livestock of the most disadvantaged are in the worst condition, never fattening on underused high pastures.³⁷

In some ways, the turn towards small-scale farming and herding based on large and small kinship networks recalls pre-Soviet practices. Chroniclers of Central Asia record a long-standing symbiotic relationship of Kyrgyz and Kazakh pastoralists with Uzbek and

³⁶ However, modelling business ventures on this kind of reciprocity, at least with livestock, does not have a good track record: each animal loss is a potential source of conflict (Jacquesson 2006).

³⁷ It seems large seasonal migrations were a sign of wealth also in pre-Soviet times: demonstrating both the grazing needs of larger herds, as well as asserting the capacity to fulfill these needs (Shahrani 2001, Petric et.al. 2004). For a similar dynamic among herders in Kazakhstan see Khazanov (1984: 70) and Kerven (2004: 6), for well-off reindeer herders see Vitebsky (2005: note to page 80).

other agriculturalists and traders, although where possible, the Kyrgyz have also long engaged in agriculture as an add-on to herding (Khazanov 1984:16-20, Valikhanov 1865: 282-286.) Livestock and crops such as potatoes, maize, sunflower oil, honey or apples were and are sold for goods such as wheat flour, tea and sugar, clothes and tobacco that are not produced in the Toktogul area. The day-to-day nature of looking after livestock in the summer looks more similar to pre-Soviet practices than to collective farm practices: there is less specialization or mechanization and more cooperation between kin. The camels and yaks of the pre-Soviet era have hardly returned, though hardy fat-tailed sheep and goats have again taken the place of the sensitive fine-tailed Merino sheep bred widely in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Since Merinos were dependent on heated stables and ill-adapted to moving far to pastures, they disappeared from private herds quite quickly in the 1990s.

In the pre-Soviet era, the greatest threats to the wealth of Inner Asian pastoralists were raids, against which one could seek alliances, and the *jut* (catastrophic weather conditions like drought, ice covering pasture, heavy and prolonged snowfall or livestock epidemics). Certainly, the dangers of *jut* have returned, now that risks are carried by individual households rather than state enterprises. Several authors claim that because of recurring decimations in livestock numbers through *jut*, pastoralists prefer to maximize their herd size, irrespective of pasture capacity (Khazanov 1984: 76, Farkas and Kempf 2002). Additionally, I would also suggest that people like Anvar and Elmira prefer to sell less rather than more animals, if they can afford to, because of the instability of other ways of storing wealth.³⁸ In Kyrgyzstan specifically, currency devaluation and repeated bank collapses have made people very wary of keeping their wealth in cash.

Jacquesson considers the new forms of pastoralism closer to the pre-Soviet ways of keeping animals, more sustainable socially, economically and ecologically. She describes this way of life as a kind of autarchy replacing collectivism (2003:149-151). However, since no shepherding unit lives entirely on its own resources without market, kinship and friendship networks, or monetary income from animals and animal product sales, I do not find autarchy a good description of this situation. Most families like that of Anvar rely on a combination of sources of income including agriculture, wage-labour, perhaps selling wool dyes or beer at the back door, remittances from relatives working abroad, and small welfare payments.

³⁸ This preference has also been noted in Inner Mongolia (Sneath 2000: 255). People may of course convert cash or livestock into a better housing, a car or education. The most recent *jut* hit Mongolia in 2009/10 (Hogg 2010).

On the issue of ecological sustainability, it is important to remember that the pastures are much more heavily populated than in the early twentieth century, when the population of Kyrgyzstan was approximately a tenth of what it is now. Also, many winter pastures are now under the plough- or in Toktogul, under a reservoir. Lifestyle expectations have also changed: the pastures have to sustain aspirations for education, healthcare, material goods and foods that were not common in pre-Soviet times.

In pre-revolutionary times, the *aiyl* (*aoul* in Kazakh) used to denote a group of *boz üi* that migrated together, but has come to mean a village since sedentarization (Ohayon 2004: 177, Hilgers 2002: 18). Depending on the season, there are reports of *aiyls* consisting of hundreds of *boz üi* in the 19th century, but these got smaller as Russian settlers made inroads into available pastures and as impoverished pastoralists moved less and less by the late nineteenth century.³⁹ Neither the terminology nor the size of 19th century *aiyls* has returned. A levy is no longer paid to pass through other people's pastures. On the other hand, customary law (*salt*) and *aksakal* (literally 'white beards', elders) have found new roles as mediators and judges in independent Kyrgyzstan (Beyer 2010).⁴⁰

Judging Systems: before, during and after Soviet Pastoralism

A dozen neighbours agreed with Anvar and Elmira early in the summer of 2006 that we would have a weekly *sherine*, a party. We took turns slaughtering a kid goat and hosting each other. All through the summer, once a week there was always plenty of meat, fried bread, fruit and vodka, toasts and songs. While the radio delivered Kyrgyz pop, people would take each other in a ballroom hold and sing along, swaying over the turf. But in mid-August there was bad news from the valley: the village council had decided no herders may settle on lower pastures until the harvest is in. Indeed, late in the year the pastoralists often have to deal with the quarrels and fines that cattle straying into fields cause. But as the temperatures drop and the pasture becomes exhausted, it is hard to stop the livestock drifting down to the valley of their own accord. What should the herders do? The young couples on the *jailoo* all resolved to hear what the *aksakal* Asylbek Ata had to say when they all gathered at the next

³⁹ See also Sapelkin (1977: 31) and Esengulova et.al. (2000:4).

⁴⁰ Pastures were occupied by different *uruu* groups, that is lineages traced through the male line and headed by a *bii*, *bai* or *manap*. Since the current situation of *de facto* self-administration is quite diverse, the image of uniformity we have of the pre-revolutionary era might be a result of our ignorance rather than of strong norms.

party. After some debate, everyone resolved to move as soon as Asylbek Ata packed up. They reckoned the village administration was unlikely to fine a highly respected member of the elders' court, and so everyone else could safely follow his lead in moving down the mountain.

By 2009 however, a new village council and mayor wielded enough authority, and had created enough consent to make these directives relatively effective.⁴¹ Since all pastoralists used the produce of fields cultivated by close members of the family, this was not a clear-cut case of privileging the interests of farmers over pastoralists. The situation described here is the result of a rather ambiguous legal and power situation, which in turn has been generated by a series of historical transformations in the way pastures and animals have been owned, administered and used. In the following section, I will give a brief overview of these developments.

When the Bolsheviks came to power, in accordance with the Communist theory of destroying the base in order to change the superstructure, collectivization and dekulakization were carried out from 1929 to 1932 (officially, though establishing the new order in actual fact took much longer). Forced collectivization and sedentarization from 1929 led to widespread famine in 1930-3 (Ercilasun 2009). As a consequence, many older people, the most experienced livestock herders and decision-makers, died. Men were particularly at risk of persecution as *bai-manaps*, religious specialists and assumed patriarchs from whom women and the poor ought to be liberated.

The expertise of elders was replaced by more or less formally trained agronomists, vets and zoologists, often from other areas of Kyrgyzstan or the Soviet Union, who thenceforth instructed shepherds. Collectives and brigades grew increasingly specialized, employing people as milkmaids, horse, cow or sheep herders, drivers, store men, accountants and so on. The organization of winter fodder or labour, checking the health of the herd and pastures, breeding plans, selling animals and their produce were all in different hands. Much of the planning (quotas and supplies) and flow of information was centrally administered through a chain of command reaching from Moscow through Bishkek to the farm manager

⁴¹ The *aiyl ökmötü* (village government/representative) consists of a president (called the *aiyl ökmötü* too), a village council (*aiyl kengesh*) and specialists such as an agronomist. The *aiyl ökmötü* is responsible for collecting taxes, distributing state employee salaries (school and medical staff), pensions, the army draft, fuel and tractors for agriculture and maintaining infrastructure such as roads and bridges. Created in 1996, the *aiyl ökmötü* has been subject to an oscillating mix of appointment by governors and election. Their responsibilities and financial means have been increasing recently.

(*bashkarma*), *brigadirs* and finally workers.⁴² Rather than turning livestock keeping into an intensive industry however, as Marxism-Leninism required, local conditions forced compromises, in continuing seasonal migrations, using *boz üii* and allowing some private livestock (Ohayon 2004: 182-8).⁴³ There were legal (much-disregarded) limits to private herds, which became an extra rather than an essential income. While the process of collectivization was engineered quite differently in different areas, the post-war years saw a very high degree of homogeneity in how collective and state farms raised livestock.

Herds were hugely expanded, to the chagrin of environmentalists, who see heavy stocking as the source of today's overgrazing and desertification problems. The post-Soviet scholarly literature also condemns Soviet herding practices for encouraging a lack of initiative and ignorance of traditional practices and breeds (Sitianski 1998: 159).⁴⁴ Pasture users on the other hand often see the Soviet pastoral mode as highly successful in raising livestock and affording them stability and a good standard of living.⁴⁵ Remote herding posts had monthly supplies of food, medical and veterinary services, and sometimes even entertainment such as films were shipped in. A shepherd received a relatively high salary, could keep a larger private herd and was not subject to much supervision by the *kolkhoz*.⁴⁶

Experienced herders often speak of the huge herds, 500 or 1000 sheep, 70 cows that they were expected to supervise.⁴⁷ Unlike the scholarly post-Soviet literature, herders less

⁴² For more detail on memories of collectivization, the *kolkhoz* era and privatization see chapter 6

⁴³ Humphrey remarks that in Buryatia, it was nevertheless traditional herders who were most successful, which rather undermined the Party's claims to scientific superiority. The chain of transmitting such herding expertise was however severely disrupted by school and distances. It is now called 'wisdom' rather than knowledge (Humphrey 1998: 228-231).

⁴⁴ Examples of this critique can be found in Jacquesson 2003, Kendirbaieva 2002, Kerven 2004, World Bank 2007, Liechti 2008. Finke 2004 also comments on this situation in Mongolia, Anderson 2000 and Vitebsky 2005 on Siberia, Humphrey 1998 on Buryatia.

⁴⁵ Jacquesson finds that at least the older shepherds regret the over-stocking and specialization of the later Soviet period (2003:138). I met this latter attitude mostly amongst agronomists and in only two shepherd families, among several dozen, which may again be a consequence of the specialization policy.

⁴⁶ Such forms of 'industrial nomadism' were also established for reindeer herding in Siberia, where standardized 'points of population' and 'points of supply' became largely dependent on a centralized supply system (Vitebsky 2005: 43-7). Whereas in Siberia, women were drained off the taiga and separated from unattached males herded reindeer (Vitebsky 2005: 193-4), in the case of transhumant herding in Kyrgyzstan, women have remained an integral part of pasture labour for milking and processing dairy products at the very least.

⁴⁷ See also the accounts by Koichubek and Bazarkul in chapter 6.

often mention that this emphasis on quantity resulted by the early 1990s in large numbers of ill-cared for and under-nourished animals. Since they were rewarded for quantity rather than quality, this was no longer relevant to them. Now of course fat livestock fetch much higher prices and make for much better food than the sickly.

Private Herds – Common Pasturelands?

The Soviet culture of specialization meant in the early 90s many people like Anvar and Elmira were suddenly responsible for cattle, horses, and sensitive Merino sheep that they had no stable or fodder for, and which they had no experience in caring for. Privatization of livestock, agricultural land and other assets has been quite as chaotic (though not as overtly violent) as collectivization. How this transformation was handled locally varies quite widely, but overall it led to widespread impoverishment, as people's salaries were replaced by a one-off payment of livestock, which immediately flooded the market and thus fetched very low prices.⁴⁸ Between 1990 and 1996, about two thirds of the sheep, and a third of the 17 million heads of livestock in the country were lost (Kerven 2004:13). This also happened because the livestock had already been neglected and because collectives were saddled with debts and the withdrawal of deliveries, opportunities for sale and personnel.

Unlike collective farm production, privatization has not led to a very uniform system of land management. Although *privatizatsiia* is often talked about as being a moment in the past, privatization is actually a partial, long drawn-out and ongoing process, with the Kyrgyz energy sector for example still undergoing changes in ownership, as I will discuss in chapter 3. According to the 1993 constitution all land is owned by 'the Kyrgyz' (as an ethnic group), though this formulation was modified to 'Kyrgyzstani citizens' later (Giovarelli 2001: 90). Since then, agricultural land and other assets have gradually acquired the legal trappings of private, sellable property, but pasture remains the one form of property that is state-owned. The above discussion demonstrates that mountain pastures remain the mainstay of the rural economy and have always been administered in some way collectively. Because they are so valuable to livelihoods, use-rights of pastures have always been contested. I will detail state attempts to regulate pastures, evident in the conflict between herders like Asylbek Ata and the aiyl ökmötü, before returning to Saikal Apa's wider concerns with *jailoos* as health giving and *taza* (clean).

⁴⁸ See also Bazarkul's comments and the discussion of privatization in chapter 6

There is now quite a lot of diversity in how individual communes govern their pastures, with some common characteristics deriving from a common national policy working on different ecological conditions and power relations. Anyone living in a village has the right to use its allocated pastures, though people from neighbouring communes may also be tolerated by their neighbours if they have been coming for a long time, or have strong kinship connections with the *jailoo*. If someone does not occupy their campsite for a year or two, it can be occupied by others. Because during the Soviet period allocation of pastures switched as administrative borders were redrawn (for example, Toktogul changed regional administration at least three times in the last 30 years, and *kolkhozes* (collective farms) and *sovkhozes* (state farms) were merged and separated in several waves), there are now frequent disputes between communes over land. There are also earlier competing memories of whose pasture and other lands used to belong to which *uruu*, and these claims may be settled by common law (*salt*), away from the formal law courts. However, these earlier claims are also not at all fixed, since inter-marriage, political alliances, raids and land disputes both between Kyrgyz groups and with Russian settlers or Uzbek farmers are no novelty.

Until very recently, winter pastures close to villages were administered by the *aiyl ökmötü*, the middle-range spring, autumn pastures were a raion (district) responsibility, and the remote pastures were subject to the ministry. This arrangement designated which agency received pasture lease payments. For the last decade, the state proposed a complex structure involving bidding for pastures and ‘business plans’, which few pasture users are aware of in detail, and which was in effect often ignored in favour of informal agreements, or selectively applied by those with the necessary authority and knowledge. Needless to say, this causes much friction when richer livestock owners bypass use-rights in buying up the fattest and most convenient pastures. The discrepancy between the formal and informal rules of the game, and the insecurities this creates for herders are also noted by Finke (on Mongolia, 2004: 251) and Steimann (2009). However, the limited capacity of the state to impose its rules, lease payments and livestock tax on pastoralists also gives them a certain room for manoeuvre. Since 2008, a new law has passed the administration of all pastures to local ‘herders’ associations’ (the interpretation of how these are constituted varies quite a lot), and decrees that they should be managed in accordance with experts’ measurements of pasture carrying capacities. In practice, it is likely that expert advice of this kind will be scarce and that the law in Kyrgyzstan will continue to be a rather more flexible, haphazard beast than it

declares itself to be.⁴⁹

As we saw in the case of Asylbek and his neighbours at first defying aiyl ökmötü orders, and then bowing to a new consensus, laws in the context of pastures are highly negotiable, and much depends on the standing of the parties involved, their status, political alliances and divisions (I use ‘political’ here in the broadest sense). Although the complex legal situation seems to point to chronic conflict, this picture is somewhat overdrawn. Many people return year on year to the same pastures, and achieve cordial agreements with their neighbours over changes.⁵⁰ I have examined the historic and political context to explain the current transformations and consequences of relations between herders, state administrators and *jailoos*. As the example of Inner Mongolia demonstrates, the *kind* of state also plays a role: the disjunction between government policies and pastoralist practices is less damaging to pastoralists in Kyrgyzstan than in Inner Asia, because of the weak hold of the law. The fact that Asylbek Ata and others can sometimes afford to ignore aiyl ökmötü instructions, hide livestock numbers or tolerate kin from other communes on *jailoos* is also because these are extensive and remote areas, hard to police. The dam discussed in chapter 3 provides an instructive counter-example of state-citizen relations reconfigured around other objects or places. The discussion above demonstrates that mobile pastoralism is not a thing of the past in Kyrgyzstan, but a vital part of livelihoods and kinship relations. I now turn from pastures as territory and resource to pastures as experience, a beautiful place that generates health, wealth, *tazalyk* and ‘Kyrgyzness’.

The Jailoo as the Source of Health, Wealth, Beauty and Tazalyk

The rock face bending like a mountain,

Pouring fragrant perfumes.

From high up above appears Chaar-Tash,

One can see Shamshykal.

⁴⁹ Reeves argues that this uncertainty, rather than being evidence of a weak state, is a tool of government, applied selectively to create fear and derive revenue for state actors: her example are state border officials (Reeves 2008: 34).

⁵⁰ Other kinds of land raise much more heated quarrels, such as agricultural land, irrigation networks, illegal building in the suburbs of Bishkek and state borders.

*From the high peak of Tonchu,
feelings sharpen and develop.
People can relax
When they see these beautiful apparitions.*

*The waves wear stone jewels,
They swing and wink in the sun.
One can hear melodies in the mountain,
The water of Toluk rushes.*

...

*The sky rides a rock face like a horse,
close to the Moon and the Sun.
One cannot imagine how lovely,
Nomad life is in spring?!⁵¹
Toktogulov (2003:12)*

The yearning expressed in this poem wakes my own memories of summer pastures: the fragrance of marjoram, the breath-taking views, the grandeur of the cliffs, the sparkle and bubble of fresh water over colourful rocks. The poem evokes the mountains as a place of expanding feelings, a place to relax in and feel at home. Speaking to many people like Anvar or Saikal Apa about *jailoos*, I frequently saw their eyes light up at the thought. What is it that they take such pleasure and satisfaction in? Surely not the pasture as a resource controlled by various means, as discussed above?

If there is romance in my sense of the *jailoo* and in the tourist's curiosity for a way of life that looks ancient and more 'in tune with nature', this chimes with the image of the *jailoo* that national TV projects. The interludes between programmes are regularly bridged by camera scans of mountain landscapes capturing horses, running water and flowers nodding in

⁵¹ This poem is called *Ata-Konush*. A *konush* is a place where people settle or birds perch. Kyrgyz poetry requires considerable language skills to decipher: its sentence structure is removed from the everyday, it operates within its own conventions of imagery and genres, and often lives on ambiguity. I have endeavoured to retain what I think the poet intended to convey in terms of content, imagery and tone. It has not been possible to preserve the strong rhythms of Kyrgyz metre, the appreciation of alliteration and sound symmetry. I have endeavoured to point out other possible interpretations and have edited for brevity. I will return to poetry praising nature in chapter 8.

the breeze. These are accompanied by komuz melodies.⁵² Similar visions hang as oil paintings in city apartments. The following section will examine why these images are so prominent, and how they relate to the questions of pastoral livelihoods and ownership discussed above.

The moonlight is evenly spread over the Earth

The livestock in the pasture is so fat

Have fun when you have strength

The youthful years of 18 will not come back

The livestock on the pasture is fat

The sun is shining evenly in the sky

Have fun when you have strength

The youthful years of 18 will not repeat themselves forever.

Alimkhan Apa sang me her composition one afternoon at her table, after telling me stories from her childhood. She was in her nineties at the time, and very poor. I have already mentioned that the very poor rarely use high pastures: it had been a long time since Alimkhan Apa had visited. In the two poems above and many others, the *jailoo* features as the site of natural beauty and youth, features I will return to in chapter 8. Here, I want to concentrate on the association of *jailoos* with healthy livestock and *bereke*: abundance.⁵³ As Alimkhan's song mentions, here sheep can get fat and multiply. High pastures are appreciated for the *dary chöpter* (medicinal herbs) that livestock enjoy. For those who know and work the mountain pastures intimately, there is wonder in a kind of beauty that is at the same time generous: the lush meadows are at once a riot of colour, and promise fat sheep. One of the qualities people also praise *jailoos* for is that they are *kenen*: plentiful or spacious.

Livestock are a form of wealth and property with very particular characteristics: they are *alive* and need to be protected, provided with winter shelter and led to food. They are mobile, can be bought and sold very easily or serve as foodstuff and currency themselves. They have a very stable use value (subsistence, prestige) and a more stable sale-value than

⁵² Komuz: national instrument, three-stringed type of mandolin, usually of apricot wood.

⁵³ The word *bereke* is likely related to the Uzbek –originally Arabic– term for divine blessing ‘*baraka*’ (also ‘*barakah*’) (Abramson and Karimov 2007: 321). In Kyrgyz however, such blessings are ‘*bata*’.

other goods in the post-socialist era.⁵⁴ They can multiply and decimate very quickly. The number of livestock is a rather reliable indicator of wealth, indeed a synonym for ‘rich’ is *malduu*: full of livestock/having many animals.⁵⁵ In short, livestock, and the *jailoos* they get fat on, spell *bereke*: material abundance. In consequence, Saikal Apa and others sometimes compared summer pastures to a rich table, covered with different dishes for the livestock to feast on.

Considering the intimate link between the welfare of livestock and people, it is not surprising that they are metaphorically connected too: their meat portions are distributed according to seniority, their felt used for keeping people warm in *boz üü* and on carpets, sheep shoulder blades and knuckles are used for divination, wild goat’s horns or horse skulls mounted for good luck above porches. Rams horns and the ‘mountain pattern’ are among the most common designs on felt carpets (Bunn 2000: 230-1).⁵⁶ Though at present the very poorest and very richest rarely work on summer pastures, this does not mean there are no large wealth differentials between pasture users: some take a handful of cows up, others a thousand sheep and a large herd of horses. Since the well-being of livestock is so intimately connected to that of humans, it is not surprising that places in the mountains, i.e. pastures, are mostly assessed in relation to how good they are for livestock, and people: livestock is the medium through which most people know mountains. (cf. Liechti 2008:18).⁵⁷ Flowers and fat

⁵⁴ This stability in market price is subject to seasonal variations, the international market and so on, yet apart from the mid-90s when livestock were worth very little cash as they flooded the market, they have proved a fairly stable value. Horses have become particularly expensive, even though their numbers have increased swiftly: they are much used again as transport, a preferred food and status symbol.

⁵⁵ For this reason it can be rude to ask directly how many animals somebody owns. Other ways people assess each other’s wealth are types of housing, consumer goods like cars, clothing and other sources of income such as businesses, administrative posts and remittances from close relatives.

⁵⁶ Sneath has suggested that Inner Asian pastoralism has inherent tendencies towards wealth differentiation, since a herd can ‘take off’ in numbers once subsistence needs are met, while those having less animals than they need to feed themselves will always struggle to maintain the herd. This, he maintains, is the reason why wealth differentials appeared so rapidly in Mongolia, when theoretically in decollectivization every household got an equal share. He also notes the differential starting position in connections necessary for acquiring scarce supplies, e.g. winter fodder (Sneath 2000: 259-61, 271-2). I think a further reason for growing wealth differentials is the role of differentiated experience in managing livestock. The relatively small wealth differentials in pastoral societies have attracted several other explanatory models (Barth 1969, Khazanov 1984).

⁵⁷ I will discuss one other important way of being in mountains, namely picnicking in chapter 8. Other mountainous ways of life such as bee-keeping, mountaineering (Russian-led *alpinizm*) and mining are much more specialized and only featured peripherally in my fieldwork.

sheep should however not blind us to the fact that mountain pastures can be dangerous, cold, physically demanding and boring. Occasionally, questions about the *jailoo* would not generate shining eyes, but the laconic or bitter comment that ‘*there is no alternative*’ (*aila jok*). Such an answer however adds to, rather than subtracting from, the fundamental role of the *jailoo* as the mainstay and fall-back of livelihoods.

Having animals (*mal baguu*) is often also appreciated as a properly Kyrgyz livelihood.⁵⁸ The *jailoo* is where horses, those most precious beasts, slaughtered only by the very rich and to honour the dead, really come into their own. Keeping a good herd of horses is a prestigious activity of many urban businessmen or civil servants. At election time, candidates and patrons provide animals from their herd for election feasts. An obedient, experienced stallion is an indispensable helper in herding, as a mode of transport and player in horse games. Unlike the rest of the livestock, herds of mares and foals only have consistent contact with humans in the height of summer on the summer pastures, when they are milked to produce the national drink: *kymyz*.

This highly valued food is produced exclusively on the summer mountain pastures. Its quality quickly degrades at hot lower altitudes, and it moves from being a free gesture of hospitality to being rather expensive. It has all sorts of healthy properties, for children’s growth or for TB-sufferers confirmed by science (Shakhanova 1989). As Jacquesson has noted, good *kymyz* is not only proof of the herdsman’s skills in seeking out good pastures for the herd, but also of a well-run and harmonious family unit. The process of keeping herds of mares, milking them and preparing containers for fermentation, churning the *kymyz* and distributing it is a highly skilled and cooperative activity. Such families strengthen links by giving out *kymyz* to neighbours, relatives in the city and passing strangers with a warm hand. It thus has a social value, which explains why it is made in quantities that far surpass the producing family’s needs or ability to sell it. Jacquesson points out that recently the health-giving properties of mountain foods like *kymyz* have been described as ‘ecological’ and ‘biological’ (Jacquesson 2005: 81-83).⁵⁹ *Kymyz* is one of the *jailoo*-produced foods that are considered to have strong medicinal properties, like certain animal meats and fat. Food here is a way of making kinship, and even nourishing the ancestors with the good smell of animal fat (Bunn 2000: 232). Perhaps the common saying ‘we look after our souls with livestock’

⁵⁸ See chapter 7 for further discussion about the ambiguous judgments on keeping livestock as a form of work.

⁵⁹ Wild foods such as raspberries, mushrooms and wild onions are an important part of rural diets and source of income.

(*Biz mal menen jan bagabiz*) implies all of the above. A more Kyrgyz way of describing these aspects of *kymyz* than ‘ecological’ would be as *taza*: ‘clean’, ‘pure’ or ‘wholesome’.

Saikal Apa, along with many other Kyrgyz, describes the pastures as wonderful because of their clean (*taza*) air and water. What Saikal Apa longs for at the end of winter, *tazalyk*, is quite a complex quality that she associates and feels in touch with on the summer pastures. She finds this quality in the air and water, in the special foods we eat, the kinds of work we do and what we can give of this to our relatives and friends in the valley. In this sense, the *jailoo* is a place of well-being not only for those who inhabit it, but also for those who receive its clean waters, foods and strong kinship relations.

The quality of *tazalyk* can be directly translated as cleanness, healthiness or wholesomeness, but it means much more than that. People can be described as *taza*: pure, honest or upright.⁶⁰ *Tazalyk* is also associated with the colour white worn by Muslim clerics and by many people visiting *mazars*, where they go to purify themselves (*tazaloo-*) and where they may hope to encounter a white snake or camel foal. Healthy and precious foods such as milk, cream and fermented mare’s milk are also all white, and can be used for ritual purposes. *Tazalyk* is further often mentioned as a quality of clean water. A familiar and even banal saying is: ‘*bizdin syy taza, aba taza, el taza*’: ‘our water, air and our people are clean’. Perhaps this is one reason why Saikal Apa and others commented that ‘*only good women go to the jailoo*’: women who work to produce large quantities of wonderful food for their extended family, hospitable women, women who do not mind the hardships of collecting dung and doing without television). *Jailoo* activities make them good people.

⁶⁰ See also chapter 7 on the notion of *tazalyk* in relation to work.

'Home of the Kyrgyz'?

*There is snow and ice even in summer
Wherever you look, there is beauty.
These are the mountains
Where there is always complete happiness.*
...
*In the flat field and wide plains
Even when I am among merriment.
There is still that wonderful silhouette
In front of my eyes, calling me.*
...
*Mountains are my support
They are the gift of my ancestors.
I am in the mountains ... and the mountains
Keep living in my heart.*
(Ramanov 2004: 72)

The poem here invokes the beauty of the mountains as a true home, a place gifted to the Kyrgyz poet by his ancestors. Indeed, occasionally summer pastures are called 'motherland' and people may want to be buried there (Bunn 2004:57). A recent production of the Kyrgyz film studios, 'Cool Grey' (*Boz Salkyn*, Abdyjaparov 2007) tells the story of a city girl, abducted against her will to a remote village. It is through flowers and horsemanship that her husband wins her grudging affection, it is *jailoo* life that finally reconciles her to her new existence and allows her to dance over the meadows. Such is the power of the mountains. Not surprisingly, the *jailoo* is an ever-present scene, evoked in schoolbooks teaching 'knowledge of the fatherland' (*Meken Taanuu*), paintings and TV shows depicting Kyrgyz culture. These are also the images that attract most foreign tourists to Kyrgyzstan, only rivalled by the waters of lake Yssyk-Kul as Kyrgyzstan's treasure. Noticeably, these images, not unlike eighteenth-century European landscaped properties, rarely feature people working. Insofar, John Berger's comment on European landscape painting as mystification seems appropriate: '*Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain*

behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place' (Berger 1972: 41 in Wylie 2007:69).

Images of the *jailoo* invariably include a *boz üi*, a kind of dwelling that calls forth strong sentiments. Bunn describes the *boz üi* as a 'core metaphor for Kyrgyz nomadic life' (2000:14). It is the quintessential home of the Kyrgyz family, that you are embraced by when you enter any *boz üi*, a touchstone in an otherwise spatially fluctuating way of life (Bunn 2000: 19 and 513).⁶¹ The *tündük*, the central wheel of the roof structure, is the main motif on the Kyrgyz flag and is associated with unity, strength and the sun. Beaches or forested national parks will have at least one cafe housed in a *boz üi*, offering *kymyz*, tea and - if there is electricity - ice-cream and bottled drinks. As Bunn has noted, *boz üi* can be found in a wide variety of contexts in urban life, as concrete bus shelters, steel frames standing over graves, as cool summer houses in the yard or as bases for political demonstrations. They have not however been adapted to suburban shantytowns as in Mongolia (Sneath 2006: 153).

Mountain panoramas are pleasant and politically inoffensive. There is of course a political message though, which in the above poem moves from the love of nature to pride in the ancestral homeland. On occasion, this can be equated with the state and current government. As well as representing a large chunk of Kyrgyz territory and an important source of livelihoods, the *jailoo*, it seems, is where Kyrgyzness is imagined to happen. As a place, it is a type, where mobile homes, whether *boz üis* or cheaper tents, horsemanship, traditional foods and skills seem to have an eternal home. It is where the national drink *kymyz* can be drunk under the *tündük*. Rather than seeing *boz üis* and *kymyz* as a vestige of a dwindling nomadic life, as the early Soviet regime intended, we can see these new-old symbols of national identity anchored in a robust way of life.

As *jailoos* were once the strongholds of *bais*, they may now be imagined as a refuge of Kyrgyzness, away from the cosmopolitan city stresses, environmental, and possibly cultural 'pollution'.⁶² Since we have seen that these pastures are neither private nor governed particularly forcefully by the state, they are the objects that come closest to communal ownership. At the same time, they are not man-made, can stand aloof from human ownership or creation, and are thus a powerful symbol of land and country. This also makes them

⁶¹That remote places and pastoralism, as opposed to urban, modern, russified lifestyles may be described as 'taza' is also noted by Reynolds (forthcoming).

⁶²I will return to the ambiguities of eternity and progress in relation to places in chapter 6 and to other dimensions of 'Kyrgyzness' conceived as religion (Kyrgyzchylyk) in chapter 4.

particularly suitable as an emblem of Kyrgyzstan. Whereas Soviet agricultural reformers saw *boz üü* and horsemanship as vestiges of primitiveness, at the same time in Soviet cultural politics this kind of ‘national culture’ was celebrated as the essence of an ethnic group. Now, though the political context has changed, the ambivalence around the Kyrgyzness, ‘primitiveness’ or ‘naturalness’ of mountain pastoralism has not faded. For one, it is problematic for a multi-ethnic state to use this image as exclusively ethnically Kyrgyz, following the role of the republic’s Soviet titular nationality.

As in the case of Inner Mongolia, ideas of ethnicity do mediate between institutions and pasture users. Locating the essence of *national* Kyrgyzness on *jailoos* is neither equivalent nor unrelated to the way transhumant herders themselves consider their way of life, described in terms of *tazalyk*, health and beauty. Wylie has argued that landscape can stand for an ‘art of right living’, for example in the long-standing British idea of walking as a way of self-betterment and of the countryside as less decadent (Wylie 2007: 129). Unlike the Kyrgyz version of such *taza* living however, the British idea does not centre on sharing wealth in livestock or foods like *kymyz* with kin.⁶³

⁶³ In some ways the *jailoo* parallels ideas about the Russian dacha, which Humphrey writes of as the location of security (also as a backup livelihood), ‘clean’ food and Russianness (Humphrey 2002: 56).



Figure 8: Mass-produced oil painting of *jailoo*

Conclusion

All the material above leads us to a view of the summer pastures as a source of health and wealth, the two on occasion being aspects of one another that can be summed up as well-being: *jakshylyk*. Health and wealth clearly also depend on good relations within the family and with neighbours and colleagues. In consequence *jailoos* have a privileged position in people's moral geographies. Although agriculture is as important a source of livelihoods as livestock, and though there are many songs, poems and sayings about the homeland, I have found few about the joys of agricultural land, plains or towns. It seems yearnings focus on mountain pastures, which as I have shown, *are* aesthetically stunning, *provide* wealth in the form of fat livestock, *generate* health through air, water and foods, and bring together the symbols of ethnic Kyrgyz nation and state-hood as a lived experience. Although the *jailoo* 'hosts' these features and although these features can also re-appear in other lived places, such as gigantic dam projects or sites of worship and healing, one should not see this as a causal argument in the sense that it is *because* the *jailoo* happens to have these characteristics

that it is so precious. On the contrary, it is the *jailoo* as a whole from which these good things flow, rather than a coming together of isolated qualities, that makes the *jailoo* so powerful: in the tenacity of this way of life, in the genuine enjoyment it can evoke, in the ease with which it merges into notions of ethnic nationhood allied to state and territory. It may be the very strength and complexity of these features, of this way of knowing *jailoos* that works against the view of governments, NGOs and scholars that pastures as resources are deteriorating under pressure.

Since as we have seen, pastures are not the most conflict-ridden forms of property, and host those with a comparatively adequate living standard, *jailoos* may on occasion be a refuge from poverty and conflict. If we think in terms of moral geographies, the *jailoo* is the site of both the good life and the hard life, depending on your perspective. The *jailoo* is both a sphere of enjoyment and economic gain: separating them out makes less, rather than more sense of people's decisions to keep livestock and use pastures in particular ways.

There are plenty of other situations in which the opportunities a place offers are assessed in more than strictly economic terms. We have already encountered the conflict between wanting to give livestock access to the lushest alpine meadows, and the convenience or necessity of being near the village. Other places are also frequently compared, as people speculate on what life might be like somewhere else. While one village may have plenty of land, water for irrigation might be scarce. Another might have good access to the main road and markets, while yet another may have heavy snows and a short planting season but large pastures and good orchards. In the same breath, people might mention that lots of famous musicians come from that particular village or that they have a particularly good or bad school. Taking these descriptions together, it would do violence to describe them as accounting for 'resources'. What people are comparing are qualitatively differentiated places rather than deterritorialized 'spaces'.

I now turn to another dominant kind of place in the Toktogul valley: hydroelectric dams, which like *jailoos*, are subject to seasonal variations. Built to regulate water for agriculture and to generate electricity, surely a dam of all things must be a resource?



Figure 9: Toktogul reservoir in March

Chapter 3: Damming the Naryn River

*From rushing river,
We have made a lake, by blocking it.
Many artificial stars,
Are spreading over the whole world!*
Toktogulov (2003: 60)

Water is the trump card that small mountainous countries like Kyrgyzstan can play over more populous and resource-rich neighbours like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and China. Central Asia is a doubly land-locked area, very far from oceans but endowed with large lakes like the Aral Sea and Yssyk-Kul. Therefore in the scholarly literature water is mostly discussed as a political asset, and as a resource whose scarcity is said to cause conflicts (Bichsel 2009:32). Indeed, privatizing water is advocated as a means of dealing with scarcity - a condition created by an enormous increase in water 'needs' such as new norms of hygiene and agriculture (Baviskar 2007: 2). In this chapter, I will look at water as a politico-economic resource, and take a broader look at the meaning of water, again addressing different ways of knowing, such as those expressed in poetry. I also investigate what role the Soviet-built Toktogul dam and the Kambar Ata dam, under construction at the head of the Toktogul valley, might play in moral geographies.

In an area so strongly dependent on irrigation, the saying goes 'Better be the head of the water than the head of the people' (*el bashy bolgucha, suu bashy bol*), that is to say, those upstream or in charge of water, hold the power. Being at the 'head of the water' is a geographical position, but also a social one: it is easier for elites to get more well-watered land (Bichsel 2009: 49-51). The irrigation systems of the Ferghana valley in particular have drawn the interest of researchers and international NGOs concerned with conflict prevention.⁶⁴ International donors such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank are involved at the highest policy level in financing and directing reform of water management towards 'good water governance', for example through 'Water User Associations' (note the strong parallel to herders' associations promoted in pasture management) as a solution to the

⁶⁴ see Bichsel 2009, Larue 2008, O'Hara 2000 and Sehring 2009.

‘tragedy of the commons’ problem (Larue 2008).⁶⁵ If you follow these upstream-downstream relations all the way to the source, you come to upstream countries, mountains, and finally *jailoos*. It is perhaps also in this respect that being ‘*close to water means being close to God*’: *Suuga jakyn – Kudaiga jakyn* (Bichsel 2009: 59).⁶⁶ In the ‘clean air and water’ mantra about *jailoos*, the power stored in the dam reservoir, and as we will see in the healing springs of *mazars*, water is a vital component in making each of these places awesome.

Running Water

Water for irrigation usually comes from rivers, and it is water as a *flow* that was mostly frequently mentioned in poetry, or when people exclaimed more casually about the goodness of water. I was assured one of Toktogul’s rivers was the cleanest in Kyrgyzstan: its healthy properties had been recorded by scientists and hopefully it would one day be recognized by the World Health Organization or UNESCO. Water as a purifying substance is also important in Muslim prayer preparation, marriage and burial ceremonies, in the blessed water brought back from Mecca, in offering water to guests and receiving blessings in return. This praise of running water, as scientifically healthy and embodying purity, is also taken up by *Kyrgyzchylyk* advocates (see chapter 4).

A running watercourse is invariably someone else’s drinking water downhill. For this reason, some people feel it is wrong to pollute rivers by washing in it, while others happily rinse out sheep guts in it.⁶⁷ Whether or not people cared particularly about keeping water courses clean, I never heard talk of people polluting rivers angering its owner spirit (*ee*) and thus causing misfortune, as they might in Tuva (Humphrey and Sneath 1996: 12-13). Water is only personified allegorically in poetry or in the springs of certain particularly powerful places: *mazars*. Although there are no particular water courses that are holy, like the Ganges or Nile, many Kyrgyz place names commemorate different kinds of water: villages particularly have names like White/Clean Water, Black Water, Red Water, Seven Waters and

⁶⁵These Water User Associations should be locally led and supply paying members with water. The main problems identified in their work is a lack of trust, lack of farmers’ capacity to pay for repairs, ignorance of agricultural needs and thus inefficient use of water, and corruption (Larue 2008). As in the case of pasture management, these are classic critiques of everything that is considered to be wrong with developing countries.

⁶⁶ See also the proverb ‘*Akkan aryktan, suu agat*’: water flows in its channels (chapter 5).

⁶⁷ Interestingly, in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border areas, whether it is acceptable to wash clothes or dishes in canals is identified as an important marker of ethnic difference (Madeleine Reeves: personal communication).

so on (*Kashka Suu, Ak Suu, Kara Suu, Kyzyl Suu, Jeti Suu*). These names point to the dynamism and hence mystery of water: how it can be a drop or an ocean, green and blue, black ice and colourless (Strang 2004: 49). If water is potent as a clean substance that can convey blessings and is often depicted as flowing, how is it affected by blocking its flow with a dam, attempts to turn the Naryn river into a source of electricity and regional influence? Further, how does Appadurai's theory of capitalist space and partial deterritorialization look like from the point of view of a dammed river? Do the Toktogul dams provide evidence of the idea that a Soviet version of modernity and industrial production eliminated the distinctiveness of this locality? I look at this question in light of the social history and ethnography of two very different dams: the Toktogul dam, built as an example of the 'friendship of the peoples' in the 1960s-70s and the Kambar Ata dam, a novel effort of the Kyrgyz government to boost its legitimacy and regional power.⁶⁸

This chapter connects the grand political discourses behind the construction of dams on the Naryn river with the lives and reactions of Toktogul valley residents, dam workers and managers, who are closely affected by the dams. These state-sponsored hydroelectric projects provide an excellent example of moral geographies that deal on the one hand with land as a resource and political bone of contention and on the other with land, water and buildings as a symbolic resource (if resource is the right word here), and indeed, as agents. How are the dams thought to contribute to, or to subtract from, the good life for citizens of Central Asia? What difference, if any, is there between a Soviet-era dam, and a dam sponsored by the Kyrgyz government but formally owned by a private share-holding company?

I argue that capitalist space as described by Appadurai is scarcely different from socialist space in the case of large dams, and that we should therefore change our terminology. This capitalist/socialist claim to 'neutral' space is a political claim, a perspective and an ideal, rather than a given. Dams are places with very specific power relations which relate closely to the hydrology and geography of the region. I maintain that dams are objects of awe that share aspects of preciousness with other places like pastures and *mazars*, particularly through the role of water. I ask how people consider the artificial water reservoir that replaced homes in the 1970s. Finally, I contrast the 'doing-ness' of a dam and reflect on how it is different from the 'doing-ness' of a *jailoo* or *mazar*.

⁶⁸ Some of the material in this chapter also appears in Féaux de la Croix (2010).



Figure 10: a fellow traveller requests a picture with the Kurp-Sai GES

Toktogul GES: a Soviet Era Dam⁶⁹

11th of June 2008

The car moves through the clammy darkness for a long time. My host Bekmurat worked on building this tunnel, as well as the tunnel on the mountain pass that linked the North and South of the country in the 1960s. He was given early retirement after 15 years of dangerous labour in the dark. Now three kilometres of tunnel, the security services, and soldiers' barracks lie behind us. We drive on and arrive quite suddenly in the noonday sun, surrounded by hot walls of rock, on top of a gigantic dam. From the bridge, it looks like a huge block of concrete poured between bare vertical cliffs. Upriver the water is still and turquoise, downstream water churns up bubbling from beneath the concrete. Large electricity pylons mount the rocks, marching away to supply the country with most of its electricity. It is quite frightening: there is nothing here but rock, water, and the concrete plug we stand on.

⁶⁹ GES: acronym for *Gidro-Elektro Stantsiya* (Russian: hydroelectric power station)

This is not a credible place. This is truly a miracle of technology. And politically, this place is as important as the country's gold mines and the seat of government.

Through damp passages, marked daily in chalk with temperature and oxygen measurements, we emerge into another wonder: the turbine hall. The marble walls are dominated by a silver profile of Lenin and his instruction and insight: '*Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of all countries*'.⁷⁰ We walk between the four humps of the turbines, and the engineer Taalaibek explains the repair work that he is completing on the fourth. Down further passages and lifts we emerge back into the sunlight, onto a terrace improbably planted with shady juniper and orange lilies. This is the terrace the control room and management look out onto, with their switchboards, charts of Central Asia's electricity network (still centred on Tashkent), heavy carpets and oil paintings of dramatic Kyrgyz mountains and snow leopards. The people working here are conscious that their work is the source of Kyrgyzstan's electricity, and much of Uzbekistan's water. This block of concrete is a resource, a machine created by Communist labour, the source of higher standards of living (electricity) but also of shady political deals.

Hydropolitics

The Naryn river (also known as the *Syr Daria*) runs some 2000 kilometres from the mountains of Kyrgyzstan to the Uzbek plains and finally to the remains of the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan. Hugh Raffles has pointed out how rivers, like the railroad tracks invoked by Bruno Latour, are '*local at all points*' (Latour 1993: 117), and thus transgress the conventions of human space. Certainly rivers and railroads make the opposition of the local and the global look rather artificial, as they effortlessly incorporate both aspects at every point of their network (Raffles 2007: 315). Rivers both *are* place and movement, *are* as elemental as the wind and as biddable as an irrigation network. Water as a substance to be controlled, fought over and distributed is a particularly peculiar resource: its mutability means it can flood, disappear down a hole, evaporate and spill over into other people's states (Baviskar 2007:1). The fact that it is so fascinatingly and infuriatingly mutable may make controlling water an even greater source of material and symbolic power than controlling land: it demonstrates even greater political and technical mastery. Like the vast majority of large rivers on the

⁷⁰ 'Kommunizm eto sovetskaia vlast' plius elektrifikatsiia vsei strani', from Lenin's address to the 8th Party Congress in 1920.

planet, the Naryn's gravitational force and the life-giving properties of its waters have been ingeniously tapped. Not only do hydro-electric dams control life-giving, capricious water, but also transforms it into another mysterious substance: electricity.

In consequence, dams like the one in Toktogul are intense, potent and enormously charged objects. Their power lies in concentrating enormous amounts of water along with capital and expertise, and so altering the long-term distribution of resources across space and time (Mitchell 2002: 21 and 36). The political rationale for building dams are usually so strong, and the calculations involved so complex that costs are often hugely underestimated (World Commission on Dams 2000: 39). Because they require such large investments in money and time, transform landscapes so radically and concern the crucial resource of fresh water, large dams invariably attract big debates. And because until recently they were often publicly funded, these are projects that attract both great prestige and great risks, examples being the Rogun dam in Tajikistan or the Three Gorges project in China.⁷¹ Indeed, there is some question now whether hydroelectricity is at all affordable, considering their impact on the local environment and people, and the fact that they usually overrun budgets by a large margin. For example, does building Kamar Ata make sense, if it increases the risk of earthquakes, or if the waters of the Naryn recede with the glaciers?

But although the dams on the Naryn share the characteristics described above with dams across the world, they are also part of a specific, ex-Socialist and Central Asian landscape. Even without the protracted negotiation around new dam projects like the Kamar Ata dam upstream from Toktogul, the complexities of water management in Central Asia are formidable. The crux of the problem lies in rivers such as the Naryn being the main source of water for irrigating the Ferghana valley, southern Kazakhstan, and finally the Aral Sea Basin. The dams on Kyrgyzstani territory allow control over this all-important 'tap'. The ecological catastrophe of diverting the waters of the Syr Daria to thirsty cotton monocultures during the Soviet Union and the desertification of the Aral area is one of the few facts about Central Asia familiar to the general public in Europe. There have been numerous initiatives to settle trans-boundary disputes between the five Central Asian states, the latest being the Aral Sea Summit in April 2009.⁷²

⁷¹ Both the Rogun dam and Three Gorges project are forcefully resettling many thousands of people.

⁷² The 'Almaty Agreement on Water Resources' of 1992 still regulates the percentage of the Naryn waters each country can draw on. In line with Soviet priorities in developing cotton production, it privileges down-stream countries and entitles Kyrgyzstan to only 1% of its waters, a figure much contested by Kyrgyzstan (Bichsel 2008:21).

The word 'rival' comes from the Latin *rivalis*: 'one living on the opposite side of the stream from another' (OED 1989). Although the political constellations are not always so clear-cut, for many years water 'producing' countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have had conflicts of interest over the timing and volume of water released to downstream countries Kazakhstan, and especially Uzbekistan (Slay 2008). While Kyrgyzstan's interest is to release water in the winter to produce electricity, Uzbekistan fears this endangers its summer crops. This is certainly one fear that contributes to Uzbek objections to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan building further dams, insisting that downriver countries have a say in upriver water management (Sodiqov 2009, Demitriye 2010). The issue here is whether water, which of all resources is the one that moves of its own accord, should be handled like a static commodity sourced in one country, like oil, or whether it should be treated as a natural gift, as Uzbekistan insists.⁷³ Uzbekistan meanwhile supplies much of Kyrgyzstan's remaining energy in the form of gas, and cases of 'tit for tat' turning off of gas and water supplies are common. At the Toktogul dam, barrage technology has not resulted in creating a neutral, profit-oriented space immune to political and natural ecology. The dam reservoir depends on seasonal glacier melts and cross-border negotiations for its potential. Citizens can gauge both the height of tensions between Central Asian states as well as yearly rainfall and temperatures from the level of the reservoir and the extent of their electricity cuts.

But let me return to the Soviet history of the Toktogul dam. A few days after touring the barrage I visit Liudmilla Fedorovna Stepanovich, the curator of the dam's museum. Her life history is intimately connected with the dam: initially sent to Central Asia as a school teacher, she was Party secretary of the worker's city beneath the dam for 30 years. To celebrate her 70th birthday she published a collection of poetry, entitled 'I love you Life' which shows the dam on the front cover. After the dam was completed in the mid-70s, she wrote:

⁷³ In the short term, while the new reservoir fills up, there will certainly be a shortfall, either in water or electricity somewhere that will require careful management. Kyrgyzstan argues that managing the water through the dams is very costly, and demands financial involvement of downstream countries. They have done this successfully with Kazakhstan in the case of the Chu and Talas rivers. A motive in Uzbek objections may also be that the new dam is likely to make Kyrgyzstan an energy exporter rather than importer, to make the country independent of Uzbek gas, and give it more regional power. The fact that the larger Kambar Ata dam has attracted Russian investment (it is not clear if this is an aid loan or an investment), also gives Russia renewed influence in the region. So far, transboundary agreements are often signed, but rarely heeded. Negotiations on water distribution or financing dams generally happen behind closed doors (Marat 2008).

Again the rock faces crash down by the Naryn.

That obstinate mighty river.

Shafts wall in the river

And its fiercely licking, churning foam.

...

Here the alloy of concrete, friendship, strength

And the flinty thoughts of engineers

Light up hearts with gladness,

The lights of Kurp-Sai replace the darkness

Resign yourself, Naryn! Into the tunnel, go!⁷⁴

(Stepanovich 2007:20)

In her admiration for the awesome technological achievements of the Soviet people, Liudmilla Fedorovna is not alone. Indeed, she shares this enthusiasm with a collective of authors under Gorki's leadership who eulogized the Belomor Canal, an enthusiasm judiciously encouraged by state publishing policies and directives. The Belomor Canal is now infamous for its use of gulag labour (Westerman 2003: 67). If people are proud to show me 'their' dam and Liudmilla Fedorovna publishes dam poetry some fifteen years after the demise of the Soviet order, it is clearly inadequate to put this enthusiasm down to habit or fear.⁷⁵ The curator shows me round the museum exhibits, starting with a display illustrating Kyrgyzstan's potential sources of hydro-energy. She explains:

'Lenin realized the importance of bringing electricity to the masses, and so the first hydro-power station was started in his life-time. In the 1920s there were already substantial plans for damming the Naryn. He wanted to bring lights to the yurts'.

Like the steel town of Magnitogorsk forcefully stamped out of the steppe, such projects were emblems of science in the service of perfecting society (Kotkin 1997:17). Like Magnitogorsk or the planned transformation of the republic's capital Bishkek, the dam was

⁷⁴Kurp-Sai is one of the dams on the Naryn, below the Toktogul dam. Poem entitled *On the damming of the Naryn river (11th May 1978)*.

⁷⁵ I will return to accounts of the Soviet era in chapter 6.

part of an industrializing and urbanizing drive that outlived Stalinism. When the Toktogul dam was opened in the mid-70s, the vocabulary of Stalinist celebration was still applied: here was a new '*energo-gigant*'. This kind of confidence also rubbed off on individuals. Maksat was a brigadier and welder working on the dam until his pension. When I showed him some photographs of the dam being constructed that I had gleaned from the archives, he recognized many of his colleagues. Holding the pictures with a mangled thumb, his eyes lit up, as Saikal Apa's did, when talking about the *jailoo*. Living in a workers' town and earning well enough to own a car, he had decided to speak nothing but Russian with his daughter. To him, the future lay in being a russified Soviet citizen. His daughter later regretted this decision when the family's fortunes turned after independence and they returned to Maksat's Kyrgyz-speaking home village.

Accounts of the area's development from the 1970s use the vocabulary of conquering or mastering nature prevalent in earlier gigantic Soviet building projects such as Magnitogorsk. Enormous dams were not the sole preserve of Socialist policies, but were built in great number from the 1950s to 70s, often with World Bank backing. They were, and still are, often symbols of patriotic pride, of human ingenuity, vaunted as greeners of the desert, as an imposing sign of progress and power expansion (McCully 2001:17). What Socialist dam propaganda emphasized more than say, the Hoover Dam, is the zeal of the dam workers, and the spirit of international friendship that set the pace of work. Indeed, where nature is conquered, this is done in the name of the most 'natural', 'simple' workers.

Liudmilla Fedorovna shows me a film called 'The Embellishment of the Naryn' from 1977, shortly after the dam was completed. The opening sequences show wild water masses spouting out of the mountains. Slowly, a huge army of workers arrives to harness them. They come from all over the Soviet Union, huge turbine parts are transported dangerously in convoy above the river. Most of the workers, particularly the directors and engineers, do not look Central Asian. Kyrgyz *aksakals* watch as the dam takes shape.⁷⁶ A big graffiti on its walls proclaims: '*Naryn, serve the people!*' (in Russian: *Naryn, sluzhi narodu!*) Meanwhile, the new town of Kara Kul is taking shape: Liudmilla Fedorovna has made a maquette of the way the valley looked before the city was built: a swamp full of snakes in which a helicopter has just landed to plant a red flag. This becomes one of the youngest, and as Liudmilla Fedorovna says, most *kul'turnii* towns in Kirgizia, with kindergartens, a museum, an orchestra and swimming pool. Just like the republic's capital, Kara Kul at the time is 70 %

⁷⁶ I address the link of Sovietness as modern, Kyrgyzness as tradition further in chapter 6

Russian, whereas now it is 70 % Kyrgyz.⁷⁷ The film further shows how the *energo-gigant* starts to function, and how a new inland sea takes shape upstream, flooding 60 by 40 square kilometres. Kara Kul must indeed have been a stark contrast to the world of sheep-breeding and dairy upstream. Liudmilla evidently loves watching this film. She is in it, shaking hands at opening ceremonies, and points out all the people she knows by first name. *'There was such enthusiasm for building the power plant'*, she remembers. The dam was an international effort, a symbol of co-operation and Friendship of the Peoples. The red visiting book attests to this. I sign too, with best wishes.



Figure 11: Museum maquette of establishing Kara Kul town in the swamps

⁷⁷ Many thousands of Russian Kyrgyzstanis left for Russia in the 90s, fearing discrimination and hoping for better economic conditions (Pilkington 1998: 4). Today, People in more rural areas are able to compensate the absence of state projects more easily while towns like Kara Kul hemorrhaged people in the last decades.

Moving Villages: ‘Who can forget the hidden land’?⁷⁸

What the propaganda film does not show is how 35.000 people were displaced from the valley centre in the early 1970s. About two thirds of the valley’s population were redistributed along the edges of the dam. As contemporary sources put it, the new town Toktogul was fitted with asphalt roads, many two-storey, well-dressed *kotagi* and trees. Every town district received a school, sports square, hair-dresser and so on. The new palace of culture seated 600, the library could hold 300.000 books. Sources of the day claim the change was all for the better for inhabitants because it meant the growth of Socialism and their ‘*spiritual life*’ (Russian: *dukhovnaia jizhn*). They call it a ‘*successful cultural revolution*’ that ‘*elevates the working masses from slavery and darkness, bringing them to a wealth of culture and humanity (chelovechestvo)*’ (Baialieva and Talitskii 1979). As a techno-political tool for such development and because of the enormous investment they require, dams are often subject to such high-flown rhetoric. But it can also become a techno-political tool for controlling, or redistributing troublesome populations, wiping out what was and building a new future, according to state goals (Schoeberlein 2000:49-51). In fact, the large-scale movement of people to improve their lives, secure frontiers and create the new Soviet Man was a technology of rule assiduously practiced all through the Soviet era (Kotkin 1997, Brown 2004, Uehling 2004).

The World Commission on Dams in 2000 acknowledged that populations displaced by dams frequently suffer a drastic fall in the quality of their lives. The commission concluded that dams should improve not only the livelihoods of some (primarily metropolitan populations receiving electricity and water, and the companies and individuals building them) but also the livelihoods of those they displace (World Commission on Dams 2000: 129-130). In the case of Toktogul, moving before the dam is certainly not remembered unambiguously. When the landscape of one’s former life simply disappears beneath a flood, with it go resources, memories, connections to people, and to the dead. Three thousand archaeological sites, among them many Scythian graves disappeared beneath the floods; only some of these were excavated (Ploskikh 1977).⁷⁹

Those displaced from the valley basin were settled around the perimeter of the

⁷⁸ Quote from open letter to President Bakiev, in Shamshykal newspaper 25th May 2007: ‘We were duped into moving from the homes of our ancestor’s bones. Who can forget the hidden land?’

⁷⁹ Ploskikh tactfully does not mention which of the sites they investigated would be submerged.

reservoir, on less valuable land (poorer soil because less irrigated, hillier places more suited to seasonal pastures than agriculture) and in the newly-built town of Toktogul. In fact, this was not the first move foisted on the people of the valley, which paradoxically may have mitigated the harmful sides of this de-racination. The 1930s settlement policies and creation of collective farms required the people of Kara Kōngöi for example to move to the main valley fifty kilometres downriver. They, or their approximate descendants, resettled in Kara Kōngöi when the dam was built. The village headman remembers they had been pleased to return to their birthplace and that they were helped to build nice houses. But the agronomist and mayor disagree, saying they had lost everything through so many moves, and that this was the reason the village was rather poor now. In Kötörmö, a new settlement from the dam era, the village has an expensive dependency on pumps supplying water. Gulnara, a teacher commented:

'If we manage to get water until 6 pm then it's fine. If not then we are left without water. If we had more water we would plant wheat, water it and make bread. Apart from that, the environment of Kötörmö is nice. But everything is connected with water, and the water is not enough.'

To this new village 'development' has meant a regression in living standards, as people struggle to make a living in a place bereft of a natural water supply. Ironically the electricity shortages the region suffers along with the rest of Kyrgyzstan are particularly devastating to this village. Now, if the dam downstream does not produce enough electricity, the villagers it stranded for the sake of electricity and water, go without both.

Standing Water

As I discussed earlier, when water is praised, for example in poetry, or when it is mentioned metaphorically in proverbs, the emphasis is on movement (waves, flow).⁸⁰ In a mountainous landscape, water hardly ever stands still and the sounds of water are never far from any human habitation. What then of the still waters of the huge dam reservoir? Lakes are considered among the most important sites of beauty in Kyrgyzstan, and several are at the heart of large nature reserves (Yssyk-Kul, Sary Chelek, Song Köl). Unlike pastures, part of the appeal of lakes is that they are comparatively rare in Kyrgyzstan, and apart from Yssyk-Kul, often remote. Living near a rather beautiful lake in Toktogul, locals never recommended it to me, but always told me to go to Yssyk-Kul to have a rest. Yssyk-Kul is a small inland sea, some 120 kilometres long. It has long been a popular settlement site, with several mysterious cities now lying beneath the lake waters. The legendary origin of its slightly salty and never freezing waters lies in the tears shed over calamities or star-crossed lovers. Yssyk-Kul has an abiding presence, intimating both history and timelessness. Unlike the reservoir, Yssyk-Kul is a place of special spiritual, healing powers. It is sometimes known as ‘lake-mother’, as in the following quote: *‘for the Kyrgyz, the lake-mother is itself a mazar’* (Kyrgyz *üchiün köl-ene özü mazar*) (Abikeev 2009:171).

⁸⁰ For example the famous ode *Akkan Suu* (Clean-white water) by Jengijok (1860-1918) in Jusupbekov 2006. Recall Toktogulov’s earlier poem about the beauty of the mountains extols running water:

The waves wear stone jewels/ They swing and wink in the sun/ One can hear melodies in the mountain/ The water of Toluk rushes. Water can even feature prominently in funeral laments, comparing the force and goodness of a person to the strength and coolness of rivers and the bounty of lakes, and the loss of this person to the loss of water, wishing them a place in the shade by a lake (Köchümkulova 2008).



Figure 12: Resort on lake Yssyk-Kul

Although the Toktogul reservoir was stocked with fish and planned as a leisure zone, it remains a strangely deserted place, with no settlements on its immediate shore and very little emotional attachment to it on the part of residents. To go for a swim from Toktogul town involves a long walk or bumpy ride down a little used track. Few people have settled directly on the lake, for the convenience or the view. This is quite different in the case of Yssyk-Kul, where the lake-shore is a hotly contested property market involving large buyers from Kazakhstan. One factor of awkwardness about the dam reservoir is that its level rises and falls many metres over the seasons. The resulting ‘drawdown zone’ is bare, and is clearly artificial.⁸¹ Unlike the Toktogul reservoir, which symbolizes the sacrifice of land to electricity and modernity, lake Yssyk-Kul draws on its natural charms and mythical status to attract very modern tourists from the region. It thus represents a ‘resource’, material and spiritual wealth itself, whereas the reservoir is a measure of absence, of all the homes, graves

⁸¹ This drawdown zone is also disliked by people in Finland and cited as one reason why people don’t consider reservoirs as lakes (Franz Krause: personal communication).

and good land that lie beneath it, and only becomes ‘resource-ful’ if transformed into electricity, irrigation or regional power downstream. And so the two dams and two lakes, identical as blue fields on a map, lie far apart in how people think of them, both on a local and a national level.

It is evident from what Maksat and Liudmilla Fedorovna said that they feel great awe and pride in the Toktogul building project. Others like Gulnara express great bitterness. Since some of the awe is generated precisely by the ‘coolness’ of mastery over nature and hope for a rationally and electrically lit future, they correlate directly with the kind of ‘neutral space’ this vision requires. The Soviet state had to go to great lengths, both in building activities as well as concealing that anything had been lost, in remaking the Toktogul valley into the Toktogul reservoir. This I think is a convincing test case for seeing ‘neutral space’ as a particular type of place, a product of intensive place-making, rather than vice versa.

In true didactic fashion, Appadurai defamiliarized the assumption that places are simply *there*. In the process of his polemic however, we are in danger of losing sight firstly of the fact that neutral space (blank slates, *tabula rasa*) requires just as much ‘place-making’ as meaningful ‘places’. Secondly, Appadurai’s scheme conjures up a disconnection between the global and the local that are simply types of connections that can combine quite comfortably in different ways, particularly if the objects are a river, or a type of development popular both in capitalist and socialist territories. (This is not to say that many people do not yearn for more of one type of connection, or the other: ‘home’ or ‘abroad’).

What the example of the Toktogul dam shows up are the great similarities between the kind of ‘capitalist space’ Marx critiqued, and activities and aims in Socialist Kyrgyzstan. Since both the U.S. and Soviet Union were financing colossal dams both at home and in client states, it is perhaps more appropriate to describe this kind of conversion of a river into electricity, and the plans and rhetoric of development that go with it, as a *modernist* project, rather than capitalist or socialist. What has become of such projects in independent Kyrgyzstan? In the following I will compare the Soviet-built dam with current dam-building on the Naryn.



Figure 13: Construction work on Kamar Ata 2 dam in 2009

Kambar Ata 1 and 2: post-Soviet Dam Building

Recently a dam project that had lain abandoned throughout the nineties has been resumed with government and international capital. Liudmilla Federovna is delighted that the dam '*will be bigger than the Toktogul GES, so soon we will be exporting [electricity] to China.*'⁸² The government is thus proving that it is working for the benefit of the country in continuing a modernist project of the Soviet era, but under quite different ideological auspices: where before there was talk of the Friendship of the Peoples, there is now emphasis on independence, privatization and asserting regional power. What then is the difference of local feeling, economic and political import of the new dams?

Whereas I had been inspected and needed authorization to visit the old Toktogul dam, the effort I had to put in to secure a visit to Kambar Ata was much greater. Rather than crawling around turbines with engineers, I rode in a chauffeur-driven jeep. Managers were used to taking round delegations: '*it's like a zoo*', they said resignedly. Because Kambar Ata had become president Bakiev's most high-profile endeavour and a politically sensitive project, difficulties could not be discussed, again quite different to my Toktogul dam experience. Kambar Ata is named after a small tributary to the Naryn, but Kambar Ata is also a typical name for a holy site, and the protector spirit of horses. The first Toktogul dam was named after a famous bard who supported the early Communists. Both have kept the names given by 1960s Soviet planners. Perhaps the aura of the names is not coincidental, and useful to combine with images of heavy industry and singing bards in commercials advertising the government's efforts. As in the case of privatizing land, the process of privatizing the Kyrgyz energy industry has been piecemeal and contentious. Since 1998 all working electricity stations are joint-stock companies with the government as the major stake-holder. Bakiev's recent efforts to find investors for Kambar Ata have been met by fears among members of parliament that fully privatizing energy and water will let control over these crucial resources out of Kyrgyz hands (Abdrakhmanova 2010).

Despite these very 'capitalist' concerns, I was told repeatedly by engineers and dam managers that the plans for the new Naryn dam were *the same* as those realized in the 1960s and 70s. Indeed, the dams were started in 1987, and some of the materials and structures

⁸² Toktogul has an annual output of 4.4 million kWh per year, Kambar Ata 1 (not yet under construction) should produce 5.1 million kWh a year (OAO Elektricheski Stantsii brochure). Figures quoted on projected electricity production vary hugely in different sources.

delivered at the time are now back in use after a hiatus of fifteen years. Unlike on the Soviet building project, here most of the three thousand workers and experts are Kyrgyz. But as in other economic sectors, the well-paid construction jobs are hard to come by without a substantial money gift or connections, complain Toktogul residents.

Apart from the jobs available, there is little direct impact on the Toktogul valley itself so far: virtually nobody is being displaced or requiring compensation for land lost. Unlike many other large-scale dam projects such as the Narmada dam in India or the Three Gorges project in China, Kambar Ata has not drawn extensive criticism from the Toktogul valley itself. This is mostly a consequence of the geography of the site: unlike the Toktogul dam which displaced thousands, the new dams do not threaten any villages and will be contained in a little used, remote gorge. The lack of protest is also a consequence of the fact that Toktogul citizens had the bitter experience thirty years ago of being displaced without being able to protest or seek redress for land they felt inadequately compensated for. Meanwhile the resentment between Toktogul residents and the Toktogul dam management is rumbling on acrimoniously. Petitions to President Bakiev over outstanding and ‘disappeared’ compensation payments from the Toktogul dam have yielded little result.⁸³ In light of the fact that Kyrgyz citizens go to the streets regularly about other issues such as corruption and democratization, one would assume they might do so about Kambar Ata as well.

I would suggest that Kambar Ata is in fact one of the few projects that acceptably bolstered the government’s fragile legitimacy. As Mitchell noted in the case of the United States and Nasserite Egypt, ‘*large dams offer a way to build not just irrigation and power systems, but nation-states themselves*’ (Mitchell 2001:44). They redistribute resources across time and space, between communities and ecosystems. They are a means to demonstrate the techno-economic power of the state (Mitchell 2001: 21). In studying road-building in the Andes, Penny Harvey has made the point that infrastructure is a relatively straight-forward way for governments to prove they are ‘doing something’ (Harvey 2005). It is likely that providing cheap electricity (if it does turn out to be cheap), revenue that can be turned into services for citizens, and bolstering regional power is precisely what most citizens would like their state to do. Water is after all often quoted as the main wealth of Kyrgyzstan: why not tap

⁸³ Protest letter in Shamshykal newspaper 25.5.2007. This kind of protest is common more generally from Kyrgyz citizens, who expect their state to supply affordable essentials such as flour and electricity. Enormous hikes in domestic energy prices connected to privatizing the energy sector were a significant grievance in the bloody protests of April 2010.

it? Or to put it more negatively: Toktogul people may feel opposing the new dam would negate the meaning of their earlier displacement. If dams are not a good thing, what was the point of it all?

There has also been little environmental protest, as the series of dams that already block the Naryn already impact the river's quality heavily, and there are no well-known natural treasures or archaeological sites under threat from Kambar Ata. Unlike previous outrage against territory being ceded to China for example, this is not a case of territory being handed over, though the land itself effectively disappears, being transformed into a water container. At issue is more whether the project can be funded by state, citizens or foreign investors. Concerns also focus on whether the Kyrgyz government is ensuring adequate expertise on site, for example on the issue of earthquakes.⁸⁴ In light of the recent explosions of a Siberian hydro-plant of the same type and age as Toktogul, these concerns will have an even higher profile. And many Kyrgyz citizens, both in the Toktogul valley and further away, feel they will likely not see many of the promised benefits. As Gulnara in Kötörmö, the 'stranded' village put it:

'Jeanne, it is like this. There are ways for Kyrgyzstan to get rich. We have gold, we have coal, we have other minerals. Kyrgyzstan is the motherland of the energy sector! ... It's just that people in power, the authorities are not taking care of people.'

Conclusion

Dams are both the source of great power and the outcome of great effort and investment. The following reflection is relevant to both dams, and *jailoos*.

'Sustained, intensive and collective labour not only creates a binding intersubjective relationship or covenant between self and other, or subject and object; it produces a sense of value and of the sacred that is felt to inhere in the site where the labour takes place. Thus landscape becomes storied, as though

⁸⁴ It cannot be said that the long-term environmental consequences of the dam are being taken seriously: a commissioned environmental risk assessment was not available yet for discussion a year after dam construction started.

the earth itself contained the narratives and scripts that human beings have created as moral constraints and guidelines for their lives.' (Jackson 2007:74)

I think in this sense, the Toktogul hydroelectric dam, this miracle of human effort and know-how, is certainly 'sacred' in the sense used here by Jackson, and not only in the eyes of Liudmilla Fedorovna. Labour was a sacred activity that created sacred artefacts in the socialist era. Where Liudmilla Fedorovna's museum praises dam workers as being in the forefront of civilizing Central Asia, of realizing a better future, in the current political climate dam workers have nothing like this status: this is no longer a worker's state.

As Anna Tsing points out in regard to the Indonesian logging industry, in Kyrgyzstan too the lines between the public, private and the criminal in the energy industry are frequently blurred (Tsing 2005: 61). This is partly because of now common international forms of combining state and private agencies in quangos or joint-stock companies, and partly because of the inheritance of a near-complete overlap of the state and (official) economic sphere from Soviet times. As Catherine Alexander suggests, the process of privatization signals a fundamental reworking of the role of the state, and the role of 'the people' or an individual in relation to it. The dams, like *jailoos*, have changed position, have become new kinds of objects with new clusters of people and ideas attached to them (Alexander 2004: 256).⁸⁵ Although officially the Toktogul dam, and the future Kamar Ata dam operate as independent joint-stock companies, since the government and Russia are majority stakeholders, there is no question that supply and demand are politically motivated and have political consequences. It is as if the 'state' form had moved inside the mantle of privacy. So it is not surprising that the TV ads and pronouncements of dam managers reveal a clear element of national pride, in a project that is part of 'national privatization' as it were, and of creating international standing and wealth.

The general acceptance of the new Kamar Ata dam (acceptance that it should be built, but not that it can be owned by foreign stakeholders) seems to point to a continuity in feeling, a modernist and civic/patriotic sentiment 'left over' from the Toktogul dam, raised by and for workers. Although we are no longer in an era mesmerized by Soviet heavy industry, an era of Socialist competition or one in which Russian-led technicians overcome an '*internal frontier of backwardness*' (Kotkin 1997: 28), the discourse of modernity, of strength and

⁸⁵The difference between a state-owned company and one in which the state holds majority shares is partly ideological, partly a matter of shares being easier to sell off.

national glory sounds very similar. Seeing land and landscape primarily as a resource to be exploited or protected is both a Soviet, and, it seems, a high modernist vision shared by state actors and citizens alike. This high modernist vision of the rational exploitation of resources has its heroism and romance too.

The Toktogul valley is in a geographically peculiar position: the dam which causes the extensive lake in its midst is not visible from the local town or villages, nor even from the town of Kara Kul at its feet, where most dam workers live. A special permit is necessary to view the dam itself. The same is true of the new Kambar Ata dams being built upstream. The only visible part of it to most travellers in the Toktogul valley is an approach road, a guard post and a litter of supply barracks.⁸⁶ Meanwhile the Toktogul dam that caused two thirds of the valley population to move has in many cases never been seen by those concerned. The Toktogul dam is enormous, hugely powerful - and invisible except on TV, in publications or to those with privileged access. In other words, the experience of the dam (rather than the reservoir) is a media experience, as remote and close as images of Moscow and New York. In this respect, although it is no more remote in geographical terms than *jailoos*, how it is experienced is a) much more controlled and b) much more at a remove, through media and effects rather than first-hand interaction.

If both dams and *jailoos* are powerful places, they are powerful on a very different basis: while the workings of the dam are removed from most people's direct experience and even vision, understood through the sacrifices it required (displacement, labour) and the gift of electricity in their homes, the experience of *jailoos* and the politics surrounding their use is more widely distributed among the inhabitants of Toktogul. *Jailoos* derive their meaning primarily from *being lived*, while the dam derives its importance primarily from absences: its inaccessibility promotes control over it in the hands of a few, water scarcity lends it significance, the disappearance of land and compensation provokes both anger and resigned silence, the disappearance of the humanist ideals the dam plans were based on. In other words, the dam is highly 'resource-ful', highly symbolic, highly politicized and under-experienced – though it should not be forgotten there was a time, when the dam was being built, when people were being displaced, that it could not have been more immediate. One might object to this argument that I have simply collapsed very individual interactions with dams and *jailoos*: those of Elmira and Liudmilla, Maksat and Saikal Apa.

However, I think it is clear from the range of interactions possible with dams on the

⁸⁶ See map of Toktogul valley on page 40.

one hand (employment in construction, commemoration in museums, and a ‘direct line’ to national and regional politics) and *jailoos* on the other (making an independent living, visiting for sociability, relaxation and health purposes) that the materiality of these places clearly imposes different ways that humans can shape their interactions with them, and around them. Despite both kinds of places being effectively state property, both the formal parameters of this ownership (inalienable state land, stock holding) and the measure of control state actors wield over it, are completely different. ‘State property’ thus comes to mean very different things for those concerned.

As the levels of the Toktogul reservoir dropped to levels that endangered the capacity of the dam to produce any electricity for Kyrgyzstan at all in the cold winter of 2008/9, valley residents spoke apprehensively of abandoned homes and machinery starting to emerge from the drying lake. Nobody seemed enthusiastic about these skeletons of a submerged world reappearing. It was too eerie. It was as if a cemetery threatened to lose its earth covering. Better to stay in the present and hope more water would conceal the past and power the bread oven again. Unlike Yssyk-Kul, and despite the quasi-sacred characteristics of the Toktogul dam, there is nothing sacred about the Toktogul reservoir. Having discussed different ways of conceiving and interacting with *jailoos* and dams and how their matter matters, I now turn to sacred places ‘proper’ and focus on the question of a *mazar*’s agency.

Chapter 4: Visiting Mazars



Figure 14: Cholpon Ata Mazar

30th May 2008

My friend Mirgul is showing me her home village in Toktogul district. It is called Cholpon Ata after the morning star (*cholpon*) and protector spirit of sheep. The village is spread along the confluence of two swift green rivers, and faces a wall of incredible rock formations on the other bank. The cliffs form a series of pyramids rising and falling along the river and are pock marked with small pits and caves that some say inspired the notes of Toktogul Satylganov's music. After visiting the museum dedicated to this famous bard, we crouch to say a prayer, asking for Toktogul's blessing at his grave in a small park. It looks a little like a grave-yard, and a little like a Soviet city park. Mirgul is worried about passing through the more unkempt cemetery next door. Instead, we climb through a fence onto a meadow where the two rivers meet. There are several holy springs here. Although neither of us came to the *mazar* with a strong wish (*tilek*) or intention (*niet*) in our hearts, we pause at

each and ask for blessings (*bata*). I think of my family, far away. Mirgul points out another special feature, a conglomerate rock with many other kinds of rock embedded in it, and marvels at how like the head of a sheep or a bullock some of these protuberances are. I later walk to the modest house in which the famous democrat bard lived, where a spring also miraculously arose.

In the last deep clear pool, I'm astonished to see a white snake. We watch its scaly pink-hued tail as it rootles among the dead leaves. I feel incredulous, thrilled and a touch scared: white snakes are not known to the zoologists of Kyrgyzstan, they count as mythical animals and are only to be found at *mazars*. It is very good luck to see one. Mirgul isn't nearly as excited: '*oh yes, that white snake lives here. It's good to see it*', she comments.⁸⁷ Intrigued, I went back next day to find the white snake again, feeling foolish as I fell on my backside in the mud instead.

Mazars, the holy places of pilgrimage in Central Asia, have generally been treated in academic literature as places of folk religious practices. The Arabic root of the word means mausoleum or tomb (Aitpaeva 2008: 16). But this is not common knowledge among Kyrgyz speakers and *mazars* are not in fact always associated with a tomb. *Mazars* range from the unmarked and half-forgotten to the imposing and widely famed such as Suleiman Mountain in the Kyrgyz city of Osh or the tomb of the Sufi saint Yasavi in southern Kazakhstan. These sites have long attracted the attention of Russian travellers, colonial administrators and ethnographers. Central Asian practices and beliefs associated with *mazars* are most often classed as religion, and then subdivided or anchored historically in 'shamanism', 'totemism', 'animism' or 'Islam' and 'Sufism', thus splitting them off from other areas of life such as the 'economic' sphere of pastures.

As Asad points out, writings on religion often carry tacit assumptions, for example in maintaining separate domains of economics, politics and religion, as well as opposing belief to knowledge (science): all this is clearly a very specific, Enlightenment and secularist project (Asad 1993: 24-7). This is one reason I want to look beyond *mazars* as an aspect of religious life, and to bring them into analytical and everyday 'contact' with other highly valued and powerful sites such as dams and pastures. Although undeniably *mazars* are places 'set apart'

⁸⁷ Snakes in general are considered potent animals, which can both heal and harm. However, nobody I met adhered to the kind of beliefs recorded by Baialieva: that killing them is a sin, that snakes understand human language or that they can hypnotize people (Baialieva 2002: 22-24).

and Turner's description of pilgrimage as a liminal state (Turner 1973: 191-2) holds true in the Kyrgyz case, my analysis aims to show how these different types of places relate and are in fact comparable. If dams derive their power from being 'resource-full' and highly politicized, *jailoos* from maintaining a way of life, how do *mazars* feature in people's lives? What effect does the segregation of *jailoos* as economic, dams as political and *mazars* as religious have?

Where my discussion of *jailoos* foregrounded the contrast between scholarly, policy and user-generated discourses, and where I queried the role of the dam in making 'the good life', I here concentrate on how *mazars* can *act*. Can they act in the understanding of Kyrgyz pilgrims, and can they do so equally in theoretical terms? Behind this question lies a theoretical concern with making a place for place as an active agent in the anthropology of landscape, rather than submerging any possible agency in constructivist accounts of place where meanings are projected and inscribed in landscape. The *mazar* stands as a test case of other possibilities of understanding places. To address these questions, I enquire first into what a *mazar* is and what it does. I then give attention to the political and moral debates about the status of *mazars* that reveal ideas of 'the good life'.

What is a Mazar?

Nurbübü Apa tells me they lived up at Chatyr Tash for quite a while, looking after Tolkunbek's livestock.⁸⁸ This place is called 'tent stone' because there is indeed a large lump of white rock in the shape of a tent, huddling at the edge of the last maize field. Beyond the steep stream bed, the mountains rise sharply. Chatyr Tash is a holy (*iyk*) place, a place of pilgrimage (*zyiarat*). Nurbübü always felt funny around the *mazar*, would suddenly start weeping. It has its own energy, she says. Good people sometimes see a *tailak*, a white camel foal around there. If you see it you will be safe, blessed with many animals, meat and health, she explained. People who visit with bad intentions never see a *tailak*. Above Chatyr Tash lies a much bigger *mazar*, which she described as *kudai talaa* (God's field/place). She tells me it has its own light that flashes at night. People now mostly go to Chatyr Tash because it is closer, stopping off on the way to the summer pastures.

What does Nurbübü mean by describing these places as *iyk*? It is a quality of certain places that have special qualities or powers (*kasiyet*) such as graveyards, and particularly

⁸⁸ My host father Tolkunbek is her son-in-law. He reappears in chapter 7.

mazars. Objects such as heirlooms can also be described as *yiik*. It can also be said of epic heroes such as Manas. *Yiik* is not a word to be used lightly; it has real force and places responsibility on the utterer and hearer to treat the *yiik* object with the proper respect. *Mazars* are places of especially great power (*küch*) that can cause miracles (*keremet*), effect physical cures, bring fertility, relieve and purify the mind. A *mazar* has an ‘owner’ (*ee*), a patron spirit or spirits. Such *ee* can give blessings, but may also punish bad behaviour. *Mazar* names like Cholpon Ata or Kambar Ata (also the name of the new dam) refer to a particular kind of spirit, a *pir* protector or master of animals like sheep, or horses.⁸⁹ Ata means father, and is also an honorific title. Sometimes a mountain can also be an ‘ata’, an ancestor protector and *mazar* (Bunn forthcoming).⁹⁰

Everyone knows it is dangerous to scoff at holy places: there was once a *sovkhos* director who went to cut down the poplars at a *mazar* to use for building. He was dead within a year. Many such stories are told of Communists or foolish people risking their lives by disrespecting a *mazar*.⁹¹ Though cemeteries or national monuments may also require devotion and may embody dearly held values and memories, these do not have the force of *mazars*. The recently discovered mass grave of the first generation of Kyrgyz Communists, murdered during the Stalinist purges in 1937 has become a national site of mourning, with a monument and museum attached. This is a place to show respect for the innocent and worthy

⁸⁹ Such ‘owners’ of animals are also known in Mongolia (Tseren 1996: 152) and Siberia (in Siberia wild rather than domestic, see Vitebsky 2005: 262, 274). Unlike the Evenki, Kyrgyz do not need to make sure animals reincarnate well. Note that Suleiman (as in Suleiman Too) is also the *pir* of water, although this is no longer widely known.

⁹⁰ I did not encounter such mountains in my fieldwork, and so cannot say how this idea relates to the equation of mountains with *jailoos* discussed in chapter 2.

⁹¹ Similar vengeful miracles are also mentioned by Humphrey 2002: 153, Tyson 1997: 22, Louw 2007:100. In accounts of Kyrgyz healers, they say the worst persecution ceased after the 50s, when there was an anti-religious campaign all across Central Asia (Aitpaeva 2007: 352, Louw 2007: 52). Unlike the severe persecution of Siberian shamans (Vitebsky 2005: 231-2), more common seems to have been a pattern of discouragement, intimidation and negative effects on the career of e.g. teachers. But we also know of many ostensible Communists fearing the consequences of their actions, and seeking out healers and holy sites in secret. It seems that for the most part, healing, divination and knowledge of *mazars* could continue and be passed on to the next generation in secret (Aitpaeva 2007: 352-3). Remarkably, a study of Soviet campaigns against Islam in Central Asia hardly mentions *mazars*, or women practitioners (Keller 2001), perhaps a sign that both the documentation of these campaigns and campaigners ignored these aspects of religion.

dead, but it is not a place of healing –so far.⁹² Ordinary cemeteries forming impressive necropolises outside settlements are mostly avoided. Like Mirgul at the Cholpon Ata cemetery, many people are nervous about entering them. However, there are certain ‘days of remembrance’ (*Eskeriüü*) when many relatives travel to pray for their dead together at the grave, and free the headstone of weeds.⁹³

Religion is usually treated as a problem in Central Asia. Both Russian-language scholarship and more recent English-language publications are equally puzzled, and often politically concerned, with the spread of religion(s) in Central Asia. What puzzled early reporters such as Valikhanov, was that ‘*the Kyrgyz call their belief Islam, but mix [it], contradictions don’t exclude each other but coexist. They believe in everything*’. He described Central Asian religion as shamanism and nature worship with a thin veneer of Islam (Valikhanov in Baialieva 2002: 85). Popular religion is still often described as ‘syncretic’, a patchwork of ‘relics’ or ‘survivals’ (*perezhitki*).⁹⁴ This description is problematic in so far as it implies essentialized, dehistoricized religions as the origin of such practices, and these practices as deviant, not coherent in themselves (DeWeese 2009: 24).

Felt acutely in an area that was cut off from centres of Islamic learning during the Soviet era, the question of ‘right Islam’ (*tuura Islam*, *tuura* also means true, correct) is of long-standing pedigree, at least for those whose authority depends on the answer (Montgomery 2006, Aitpaeva 2009). This internal debate also intersects with a secular scholarly one, and a politically violent argument.⁹⁵ I will return to these debates below. But rather than focusing on whether *mazar* visits are part of Islam, *Kyrgyzchylyk* (Kyrgyz religion), shamanism or ancestor worship, I approach *mazars* as part of people’s moral geographies. I address questions of religious definition only insofar as it bears on the way people understand *mazars*, and their influence on leading a good life.

In May 2008, I accompany Talant to see a fortune-teller (*közü achyk*) at the most famous *mazar* of the Toktogul valley: Shamshykal Ata. Talant is nervous about his imminent trip to find work in Moscow. He has never been before, and since he is not a young man

⁹² More recently, bodies of demonstrators from the April 2010 demonstrations have been ceremoniously buried here.

⁹³ Sometimes there is a *mazar* tomb of a saint or hero within a cemetery.

⁹⁴ In Russian ‘*perezhitok*’ has slightly different connotations from ‘survivals’ in English. It literally means ‘live over/ through/past/ across’.

⁹⁵ For the anthropology of Islam in Central Asia see Khalid 2000, Privratsky 2001 and Louw 2007. On the anthropology of Islam more generally, see Asad 1986, Eickelman and Piscatori 1990 and 1996, Marranci 2007.

eager for adventures, he is very anxious: will he make it there? Will he be welcomed and given work? Talant's wife cooks special flat breads for us to offer at the *mazar*. Talant says people come to this *mazar* from all over Kyrgyzstan, even Russian people and folk from Tashkent. They come to pray, light rush candles, tie a rag to a tree and sacrifice (*tülöö*) a lamb or goat to share, perhaps stay the night and take some healing spring water home. I'm careful to show respect by wearing a headscarf. We set out down the dusty track, towards an oasis of old trees and springs between forbiddingly arid hills, streaked with white seams of salt. I've often been told how scientists have proven that this salt is especially good for man and beast, it cleanses them. There are two small mines on the other side of the hill, where well-paid labourers swing pickaxes and load huge salt crystals onto lorries. Several people told me worriedly that since the reservoir had encroached on the *mazar*, the good salt was leaking away. Among uncommonly old willow and mulberry trees lie a series of springs.

Since *mazar* visits are no longer frowned on as in Soviet times, several *karolchu* or *shaiyk*, caretakers have built small guest houses (*zyiaratkana*), mosques and cooking shelters around them. They may offer their services in prayer, healing or seeing the future. Strangers may recognize a *mazar* by its singularity, special features such as springs, old trees, strange rock formations or impressive ruins. Some of these are deserted, though generally left undisturbed. Others like Shamshykal Ata have infrastructure for visitors like marked paths, protective walls, explanatory signs, and even vendors. Knowledge about such places can spread and retract. For example, in the middle of the worker's town of Kara Kul, there is a spring in the overgrown park. Different members of one family living nearby disagreed on whether this was a *mazar* or not. It is also possible to recognize new *mazars* emerging: one day, a group of pilgrims appeared at Kashka Suu *jailoo* and paid their respects to a group of trees by a stream. Saikal Apa and Sultanaly Ata had not known this place was special, but we treated it as a an *iyk* place from then, being careful not to use it as a toilet.

In the Soviet era, many sacred hot springs were made into sanatoria such as the tourist resort *Jeti Ögüz* (seven bulls). Such springs often have signs posted outside them with instructions for treatment and a lab analysis of their mineral content. In consequence, the qualities of *mazars*, like Shamshykal's salt, are not infrequently described as scientifically proven. This emphasis on science is part of the high status and truth-value of science itself in Central Asia. My role as a 'scientist' also likely encouraged people to emphasize the scientific truth of *mazar* powers. (Moldos attempting to convert a heathen researcher like me also regularly invoked the scientifically proven health benefits of the bodily motions of Islamic

prayer.)

Talant and I are invited in by a *shaiyk*. He is busy hosting a family that has slaughtered a goat. As we share the blessings at table, he tells me Shamshykal's story. *Ilgeri, ilgeri*, (a long, long time ago) a seer told a Kyrgyz khan in Xinjiang that his daughter would only recover from her illness if she ate salt from this place. So the khan sent the religious mendicant (*dubana*) Shamsy Ata, who walked fast and hard across many mountain ranges. But when he arrived in the valley, he saw in a dream that the khan's daughter had already succumbed to her illness, and heard a voice telling him: '*Shamsy, kal!*' (Shamsy, stay!). So Shamsy Ata built himself a hut on an arid, exposed hill with a commanding view of the valley, and the place is now known as Shamshykal.



Figure 15: Shaiyk (centre), healer (in white) and guests blessing a goat to be slaughtered at Shamshykal Mazar

Like Talant at Shamshykal Ata, most people visit *mazars* in times of worry or illness with a wish (*tilek*). Such local pilgrimages became particularly urgent in the difficult 1990s. But people also come more casually, to show a visitor round the sights as Mirgul did, or as a

family outing and picnic.⁹⁶ Pilgrimage and a day out may easily be combined. Though no longer prohibited, *mazar* visits remain a relatively muted affair, private even. Large festive gatherings at *mazars* are rare, unlike in Xinjiang, where they are however increasingly suppressed (Rahile Dawut, personal communication). Privratsky has also noted the restrained tone of religious practice, and explains it as a result of nomads' consciousness of their lacking orthodoxy in the eyes of sedentary Central Asians, and in the persecution of religion in the Soviet era (Privratsky 2001: 239). I would rather emphasize the attitude most people adopt when visiting *mazars*: like Talant, they usually come in hope, often feeling worried or unwell. Attending a *mazar* requires a certain humility and attentiveness to the energies of the place rather than loud and rude revelry. This is not to say that people do not enjoy such places: like Mirgul and I, visitors can marvel at the miraculous and beautiful, come in hope and trust, leave with a lighter heart and comfort.

The hajj to Mecca, though increasingly affordable and no longer prohibited, is still a rare experience for Central Asians, an adventure that endows the pilgrim with special knowledge and authority quite unlike *mazar* visitors.⁹⁷ Though repeated visits to particularly important *mazars* such as Suleiman Too are said to be equivalent to the hajj, people who achieve this do not assume the kind of status that 'real' hajjis do. So what does a visit to a modest *mazar* achieve?

Tazalyk and Healing

*If I can be clean, if you can be clean, then society will be clean!*⁹⁸

If Kyrgyz religious practice is heterodox, there is one element that is pervasive, namely the concern for *tazalyk*, cleanliness and purity. We have seen in the section on pastures how running water, mountain air, types of food and people may be described as *taza*. This quality is also connected to whiteness, like the clothing people wear to go to *mazars*, or

⁹⁶ Dağyeli notes that since it is not acceptable for women in Uzbekistan to travel purely for leisure purposes, they use pilgrimages also as a legitimate form of restful and health-giving outings (Dağyeli 2008: 99).

⁹⁷ On the teaching role and expectations of Hajji women in Southern Kyrgyzstan see Heyat 2004.

⁹⁸ Aphorism by Razakov, first secretary of Soviet Kirgizia, displayed at the entrance to Toktogul town (*Men taza bolsom, Sen taza bolson, Koom taza bolot*).

that of Muslim clergy.⁹⁹ *Tazalyk* is one of the most frequent words used in the context of religion. Islam is often described as the '*taza jol*' the *clean* path, rather than, as in the Koran, the *straight* path (Privratsky 2001: 79-80). As the moldo Midin explained, Islam is also the most *taza* religion because Muslims have the right beliefs and because they wash five times a day.¹⁰⁰ In the context of *mazars* and spiritual healing, alcohol is also polluting. My neighbour Almaz used to be known for his healing hands, but he gave up healing people as he turned increasingly to alcohol.¹⁰¹

After Talant and I have politely shared meat and bread with the *shaiyk* and his visitors, we move on to ask another guardian, Bermet Eje, to tell our fortunes.¹⁰² She willingly casts handfuls of white pebbles and predicts a successful trip to Russia for Talant. He is much relieved, and eagerly agrees to come back with his wife, light some rush candles with her and slaughter an animal, as Bermet Eje advises. I ask Bermet Eje about the *mazar* and her experience as a seer. She says she has spirit helpers or patrons (*oluia*, also known as *koldoochu*) that help her heal and see the future, but take her peace and make her ill if she leaves the *mazar*. When she was twelve years old, she was ill and her father, also a diviner, foresaw that she would start seeing at the age of forty. She prays to God all the time now.¹⁰³

Many features of Bermet's experience chime with those of other healers, spiritual leaders and also *manaschis* (bards who recite the Manas epic). Like Siberian shamans, they usually have a terrible illness in childhood or adolescence, which can only be cured by accepting service as a healer, seer or *manaschi*. Bermet is not unusual in beginning this service as a mature woman, indeed it is characteristic of present day religious practice that is primarily carried out by elders. She speaks of *oluia* which include her mother-in-law, who make her stay at the *mazar* and pray (literally, *kuran okuu* 'read the Koran'). But God (*kudai*)

⁹⁹ In Kazakhstan, *ak söök* (white bones) are the nobility, and also refer to the descendants of Mohammad or Sufi masters (Privratsky 2001: 202-3). Such elevated genealogies are much rarer in Kyrgyzstan.

¹⁰⁰ Midin will reappear in chapter 7.

¹⁰¹ Although there is a widespread practice of 'washing' a new house or car with friends by drinking vodka together, and the widespread use of vodka to ward off or cure illnesses by 'cleansing' or 'disinfecting' your insides, to 'wash' (*juu-*) like this is not the same as to 'cleanse' (*tazaloo-*) in a ritual sense.

¹⁰² Older sister, respectful form of address for any woman, related or unrelated, older than ego.

¹⁰³ *Oluia*: person who can see the future, from Arabic *awliya* (persons close to god). A wise person, usually deceased, who can protect humans and whom one may pray to. Sometimes translated as 'saint'. In Turkmenistan, such *öwliyä* are from a sacred family deriving their descent from Mohammad. Their burial sites may become sites of pilgrimage (Tyson 1997: 17-18). A *koldoochu* is an ancestor or animal spirit helper (Aitpaeva 2008: 524, 527).

is the only entity she addresses her prayers to.¹⁰⁴ Like Bermet, most healers and the majority of *mazar* visitors in the Soviet period were women, though the proportion of men engaging in such practices is increasing (Baialieva 2002: 84, Poliakov 1989: 95). The historical preponderance of women may have to do with the fact that men were more targeted in anti-religious campaigns (Tyson 1997: 20-23). Also, since most mosques do not have provision for female visitors, devout women pray and are taught Islam at home. In other words, *mazars* may be particularly attractive as the only place devoted to worship accessible to them.

Debates on the 'Rightness' and Efficacy of Mazars

Like Bermet, the vast majority of *mazar* worshippers think of themselves unambiguously as Muslims. Their practices are however often criticized by the exclusively male official clergy, whose centre of authority is the mosque (Montgomery 2006: 163).¹⁰⁵ Certainly Midin *moldo* disapproves of *mazar* visits and predicting the future as *shirk* (idolatry). But Mirgul, Nurbübü Apa or Talant were not worried about their *moldo*'s disapproval. They showed no concern for whether their *mazar* visits were properly Muslim, or whether they were respecting *mazars* in the appropriate way. It remains to be seen in how far people like Midin will be persuasive, not only on the issue of *mazars*, but also on other Kyrgyz customs such as funeral rites.

Among Kyrgyz *moldos* and healers, historians, ethnographers and on national TV the discussion over the rightness of popular religious practices continues. Soviet ethnographers like Baialieva and Abramzon wrote extensively on Kyrgyz 'ancestor worship' centred on burial rites.¹⁰⁶ It is possible to interpret the veneration of saints in this way. However, even if Bermet Eje sees her mother-in-law in her dreams and receives her help, like most Kyrgyz she would be scandalized by the suggestion that she worships her ancestors or saints rather than God. At commemoration feasts or *mazars*, a sheep may be slaughtered in honour of someone, *for* them rather than *to* them (this is not to say that their spirit cannot help or harm). This may be a shift in practice under the influence of Islam and changing kinship practices, or a

¹⁰⁴ See Aitpaeva 2008 and Privratsky 2001 for similar accounts of healers and seers. It is also possible that older people are discovering religion in a way that was not possible in their Soviet youth.

¹⁰⁵ See Dilley 2004 on similar conflicts of religious authority in Senegal between official imams and healers.

¹⁰⁶ This description is also found in much more recent publications, e.g. Tabyshalieva (2000) describes *mazar* worship as ancestor worship

different ethnographer's interpretation of similar practices.¹⁰⁷

Recently, the government-appointed muftiat of Kyrgyzstan has been distributing posters at *mazars*, telling people the correct way to worship here, for example not to pray to ancestors or drink alcohol (Maria Louw: personal communication). One NGO sympathetic to *Kyrgyzchylyk* ('Kyrgyz religion') is also signposting 'codes' at *mazars*, as well as providing facilities for visitors (Aitpaeva 2008: 135). An even stronger unease about *mazars* as part of Islamic practice is however evident for example in the fact that a book on *mazars* was refused by a state publisher, on the grounds that it was about Islam, and so a dangerous topic (Gulnara Aitpaeva, personal communication). In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the state has made very explicit efforts to redefine important *mazars* as national historical monuments and pilgrimage as a patriotic practice with a fixed format and national audience (Louw 2007: 50-1, Tyson 1997: 31). In Kyrgyzstan however, with a few important exceptions, the state has not widely incorporated *mazars* as part of the 'body politic'. A decade ago the Kyrgyz state was successful in virtually inventing a new pilgrimage site, building a large complex and museum at the declared tomb of Kyrgyzstan's greatest hero's: Manas. This *Manas Ordo* has proved rather popular. One quasi-religious site, the *Rux Ordo* cultural centre of world religions, has been newly built on the shores of Yssyk-Kul by a Kyrgyz statesman. This is treated more like a Soviet monument than a *mazar*, with tourists, weddings and state visitors sightseeing.

Kyrgyzchylyk

Sometimes the practices of divination and healing associated with *mazars* are described as *Kyrgyzchylyk* or *Tengirchilik* (also *Tengrianizm*, *Tengrianstvo*). *Tengri* is a sky-god that has a sacred mountain named after him in Kyrgyzstan, and that is also recognized in the Mongol region. However, though I have heard people speak of other spiritual entities such as *Umai Ene* or *Batma-Zuura*, I never heard *Tengri* mentioned by *mazar* visitors or guardians. Most of the time people simply speak of *Kudai*, which covers the God of Islam and Christianity. It does not seem *Tengri* is widely accepted as a synonym. I have seen the word most frequently used by intellectuals, here is a definition by one:

¹⁰⁷ Baialieva also focused on 'totemism' and beliefs associated with powerful animals such as the white camel foals, snakes at *mazars* and the use of horns for good luck. I have however no evidence nowadays of Baialieva's general claim that snakes, dogs or deer are revered.

'Tengirchilik is ancient nomadic philosophy grounded in Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, [which] teaches living in harmony with nature ... These rituals are needed to unite the nation and find the Kyrgyz self.' (Mambetova 2008: 345)

This *Tengirchilik* is promoted by prominent Kyrgyz intellectuals such as Choyun Ömüräliev and Dastan Sarygulov as a new national ideology, in response to Muslim and Christian missions (Köchümkulova 2007: 293). Ömüräliev claims *Tengirchilik* as the ancient source of all other religions (Köchümkulova 2007: 319). Similar arguments are made by intellectuals in Kazakhstan and Tatarstan. To varying degrees these ideas link religion to ethnicity, nationalism, reverence for nature and the anti-globalization movement (Laruelle 2007: 203).

While I did not hear practitioners describe their activities as *Tengirchilik*. *Kyrgyzchylyk* (literally 'Kyrgyzness') is occasionally used to describe Kyrgyz spirituality. This is a polysemantic term, referring to '*the totality of traditions and customs thought to be inherent to Kyrgyz people*'.¹⁰⁸ It includes practices such as clairvoyance, healing, Manas recitation, dream interpretation and *mazar* pilgrimage (Aitpaeva 2008: 345, Aitpaeva 2009: 526). I would like to suggest that to the pilgrims and healers I encountered, the definition of *what* their practices are, is not that relevant. As Louw has noted in the Uzbek contexts, the ambiguities of their practice may even offer helpful space for difference and screening from state interference (Louw 2007: 61). Despite efforts at labelling by muftiiat, Kyrgyz intellectuals or a *moldo* like Midin, *mazar* worship may not be an 'it' at all (Humphrey and Onon put a similar case for 'shamanism' in 1998: 6). *Mazars* do not require labelling, dogma or fixing inside or outside Islam, to be valued, at least currently by people like Mirgul, Talant or Bermet.

Mazars as Agents?

We have seen that not everyone agrees on whether or not *mazars* are good and effective sites. I ask here finally, what kind of powers these places might have. Sites of graves or springs do not become places of pilgrimage unless they are seen to develop efficacy in curing or visions, or gain a reputation, like the new holy site at Kashka Suu *jailoo*. Some

¹⁰⁸ Though I have spoken of the 'Kyrgyzness' appreciated in the characteristics of jailoo life, I never heard it mentioned as *Kyrgyzchylyk*: this term refers to religious actions and ways.

like Shamshykal or Suleiman Too are famous for their powers, but someone like Nurbübü Apa may also establish a personal relationship with a modest *mazar* like Chatyr Tash and treasure its efficacy. Is it important to know the reason, the origin of the *mazar*'s sacredness to receive its benefits? It seems this is not essential, it is more important to know which places are sacred, in order to respect them properly. Specialists, guardians and regular visitors tend to be the most knowledgeable while even immediate neighbours may not know the story of Shamshykal, for example. The history of the site can safely be sequestered in the memory of specialists or in a museum: a *mazar* is not revered *because of* particular events or holy persons.

An efficacious place is one that causes good things to happen, that conveys blessings (*bata*) or punishes with misfortune. As Asad has pointed out, Western philosophy only credits *conscious* acts as action proper (Asad 1993: 15). This is one of the problems with recognizing the efficacy of *mazars*. To the theorist, it is precisely this ontological ambiguity, this indeterminate theory of causation associated with *mazars* that is so intriguing.

Is it nature itself, or the spirit of a departed ancestor and/or devout Muslim that gives the blessing of a *mazar*? *Mazars* are host to a multitude of special experiences and beings: visions of the deceased, of Manas heroes, of white snakes. Louw describes the concept of saints (Uzbek: *avliyo*, Kyrgyz: *oluiia*) being usefully blurred in Uzbekistan, people's attitudes being that the details of what saints actually are or do, not being that important, 'as long as it works' (Louw 2007: 90). Apart from the intellectual advocates of *Kyrgyzchylyk*, I never heard *mazar* visitors or healers expand on the cosmological foundations of their practices, which is not to say they did not have sophisticated, and very varying accounts of the world.¹⁰⁹ In conversation, it was the place rather than a person like Shamshykal Ata that stood in the foreground. I would suggest that this is one way in which *mazar* healing powers are different from the agency of Catholic saints' relics or Russian icons.

In comparison to *mazars* in Uzbekistan or Xinjiang, veneration of Muslim saints is a much less common feature of *mazars* in Kyrgyzstan. The sign at the gate of the *Baibiche Bulak* ('grandmother spring') suggests quite a diverse group to be respected, by no means exclusively Muslim. The hand-painted sign announces: 'In the year 2002: Please respect this *mazar*.' There follows a list of more than a dozen local *mazars*, and a list of prophets,

¹⁰⁹It is possible that this inarticulacy is a consequence of Soviet anti-religious campaigns as well as a response to current trends among official Muslim clergy and missionaries to prohibit the practice: simply doing rather than proclaiming certain beliefs can protect practitioners from criticism and persecution.

beginning with Mohammed, Israil and ending with Jesus and Karim-Mirza. It continues with a list of famous local khans, heroes and figures from the Manas epic. As in the case of Shamshy Ata, these are all good historical figures, but only occasionally Muslims.

I came across the ‘grandmother spring’ after visiting a school, where staff were celebrating the end of exams with a festive meal and drinks provided by the pupils’ parents. They decided to have an impromptu picnic at the Baibiche Bulak, telling me what a miracle it was. We drove to a low pass among barren hills. The *mazar* was screened off by a low wall and announced by the sign above. We stepped inside and my companions marvelled, surely for the n-th time, at the way the water seeped out along a stretch of low sandy cliff, dripping down between mosses and herbs, then quickly forming a clear stream. We all sat down outside the enclosure on some borrowed mats and shared out a bottle of vodka as the sun sank lower. Two unnamed senior students had recorded the legend of *Baibiche Bulak*, to be stored at a small folk museum:

‘Since the Baibiche spring appeared, people never went without water. Once upon a time Chinese enemies conquered the people and land. They took the people’s riches, and seized the livestock. As people were suffering, our hero father Manas arrived at the head of his warriors, chasing away the enemies. The defeated enemies didn’t know what else to do, so they made the Baibiche spring dry up. They knew that people would die without water. To block the spring, they stopped up the spring’s eye [mouth]. Still the spring did not cease. But from that moment on, its flow decreased. Later, people cleaned the eye of the spring, but the spring never gave as much water as before.’¹¹⁰

The story tells us the spring resisted the spiteful actions of Chinese enemies, and along with Manas, saved the valley people from want, but suffered a diminished flow in consequence.¹¹¹ *Baibiche* is an honorific title for an old woman with children and grandchildren. The spring is called *baibiche* because it gives water so generously, like a grandmother feeds her children with plenty. As in the poetry on water mentioned earlier, here

¹¹⁰See also chapter 5 on storied places

¹¹¹ Neither account gives any indication of what time these texts are referring too. However, Manas is the hero ancestor of the Kyrgyz as recounted in the Manas epic. ‘The Chinese’ (*Kitai*) could refer to quite a number of peoples from the East and also to the Kyrgyz *Kitai uruu*, who now also live in Toktogul valley.

it is the flow of water that is important. One authority on the Shamsykal *mazar* mentioned that ‘*the Kalpaks took the salt with them but it is now regrowing*’. These accounts suggest that the *mazar* landscape resists invaders, and supports the Kyrgyz. Since many groups of people contested the Tien-Shan territory over the centuries, the actions of these *mazars* seem to support the Kyrgyz’ claim to this as their homeland.

Privratsky has argued for Kazakh lands being sacralized because they are textured with Islamic tombs and sacred sites. These mnemonic points sustain Kazakh identity as patrilineal descent from sacralised ancestors, anchored in places that they too revered. (Privratsky 2001: 66). The cases discussed here, as well as the advocates of *Kyrgyzchylyk* seem to sustain his argument, although I think the *mazar* visitors I am familiar with would be quite surprised by these connections being made. Nevertheless, there is an element of ancestors ‘sinking into’ the land and establishing connections.¹¹²

At each *mazar*- Cholpon Ata, Shamsykal Ata, Baibiche Bulak- we have images of a giving environment, one that may be inhibited in its generosity by enemies, but that will resume in time. In terms of moral geographies, the *mazars* stand out as the most directly ‘moralizing’ among the types of places discussed: here, attitudes and behaviour are rewarded and punished swiftly. Here, one can be afraid or trusting, give promises and gifts to the *genius loci*. *Mazar* visitors like Mirgul and Talant treat *mazars* as entities with qualities of personhood and they entertain personalized relationships with them. Some groups of people, such as the Kyrgyz, also have privileged access to this beneficial relationship and protection. It is for this reason that *mazars* are not subject in the same way to the discussion of whether they are a commons or an enclosable commodity.

But not all parts of landscape are so ‘personable’, able to bless or punish. Though Bel Aldy suffered devastating earthquakes in 1947 and 1992, no one spoke of these as retribution.¹¹³ Neither dams nor *jailoos*, highly valued as they are, could be described as ‘holy’ in the literal sense. Neither dams nor *jailoos* are sentient (responsive, attentive) or enspirited in the way that *mazars* are.¹¹⁴ I think *mazars* can be described as ‘charismatic’ in

¹¹² This is not equivalent for example to the strong Aborigine sense of ancestors having created the land itself and springing from it. I will return to this issue in chapter 5.

¹¹³ There are examples of earthquakes being interpreted as punishment, but this is rather unusual, not a matter of course explanation.

¹¹⁴ My use of the term ‘sentient landscape’ is drawn from the limited and concrete sense in which Anderson uses it (‘*Hunters act and move on the tundra, knowing that animals and the tundra itself are reacting to them.*’ Anderson 2000: 116) rather than Ingold, who uses the term more widely (Ingold 2000: 26: ‘*Sentient ecology is a*

the sense of being endowed with qualities that set them apart, having a supernatural gift and a magnetism, whereas *jailoos* and dams are more prosaic in their powers and intensities.

In the Mongolian context, Caroline Humphrey suggests a ‘chiefly’ and a ‘shamanic’ way of viewing and interacting with natural forces. Shamans interact with many different kinds of spirits, events and movement across a very varied topography (Humphrey 1995: 149 and 156). The investigation of *mazars* and their ambiguities places them close to such a ‘shamanic’ view of landscape: mutable, like a dead hero telling of the future in a dream, ontologically indeterminate, differentiated and variously enspirited. Humphrey has further described a Mongolian understanding of landscape as a sphere of ‘*energies far greater than the human*’ which humans negotiate and propitiate. Landscapes are not owned but inhabited by humans. According to Humphrey, Mongol cosmology is based on the need for harmony between humans and nature, and avoiding disturbances (1995: 135 and 141). In the Kyrgyz case, the powers of springs, trees and rocks at *mazars* do not necessarily translate into natural features in general being *yiik*, or as in the Mongol case, needing to respect nature, however admired.

Many natural landscape features are named for parts of the human body: ridges are called ‘fingers’, the central stone in a hanging valley may be the ‘navel stone’, passes are ‘waists’ or ‘backs’, mountains and watercourses have ‘heads’ and ‘feet’. However, I do not think that these are more than dead metaphors; they do not imply a personification of land. Rather, it points to the anthropocentrism, viewing mountains in relation to human actions and needs, noted by Jacquesson (2003). It is true that on occasion, people’s opinions and behaviour on pastures can recall behaviour at *mazars*, for example when people take care to leave old campsites clean. But this is not done with a view to literal potential rewards and punishments. It is not the case as for Evenki people, that ‘*there is no extra-sacred place*’ (Vitebsky 2005:313). Nevertheless, given that *mazars* and cemeteries are very regular and frequent features of the Central Asian landscape, they appear as more or less evenly spread nodes of charisma, of sentience. Also, since *mazars* can be newly discovered, like at Kashka Suu *Jailoo* or Manas Ordo, any place is a potential *mazar*, and so any place has the potential to be en-spirited.

What the issue of agentive places like *mazars* and non-personalized places like dams and *jailoos* leaves us with is not one overarching philosophy of nature, but a world in which

poetics of dwelling, pre-ethical and pre-objective). Attending to each other, interaction and relationality are core ideas in the way both authors use the term.

types of places are interacted with according to different frames, which allow for *gradations* of object-ness and personhood.¹¹⁵ *Jailoos* are talked about differently, more in terms of impersonal and yet forceful elements such as water and air. Unlike the *mazar*, the *jailoo* is more like a good ‘environment’ in a secular ecologist’s or scientist’s view. This is true both of the way *jailoo* users, the scholars and policy-makers I discussed talk of them. In each case, water appears as a substance with different kinds of powers attached to it: highly politicized (dam), highly sacralized (*mazar*), highly naturalized (*jailoo*). I will return to how these different modes of interacting with or understanding places manage to co-exist in the last part of the conclusion. First, let me recall the main findings of chapters 2 to 4.

¹¹⁵It is possible to postulate all the ‘sentient landscape’ elements as vestiges of a once all-encompassing philosophy of nature, but that is not my project here.

Conclusion to Section I: Meaningful Places

Where has this long journey through mountain pastures, hydropolitics and holy rocks taken us to? What has it taught us about how the interconnections and differences in the way places, and their moral and aesthetic values, are lived? In this section, I have attempted to allow different kinds of knowledge about places to be co-present: law and informal regulation, emotion and livelihoods, economic, religious and political accounts. I set out to examine three questions: firstly, how different ‘ecologies of knowledge’ draw on and affect interactions with dams, *mazars* and *jailoos*. Secondly, I enquired into the role of each type of place in creating value: good lives. Finally, I used the example of *mazars* to query concepts of agency in place. In the following, I will draw the conclusions about each place together, and relate them to each other.

‘The beautiful valley of Ketmen-Töbö is blessed with generous talents, with good air, water and quality people ... They built the Toktogul hydroelectric dam and the road between Bishkek and Osh, which is one of the highest, biggest and strongest roads in the world. I do not doubt that this is all with the will of God. Our valley has marble, Shamshykal-Ata salt and incomparably beautiful, gorgeous jailoos. From the Chichkan gorge satisfying waters flow.
(Eshmatov 2000:1)¹¹⁶

This quote introduces a book celebrating the 200th anniversary of Bel Aldy. It presents a mixture of awe at the god-given beauty of a place, and the hard-nosed economic benefits of fat pastures and mineral wealth. Quite similar narrative strategies can be found in Soviet era publications on Kyrgyzstan (such as the photo album *Kyrgyzstan* of 1972). These lands can be described as simultaneously rich in more than one sense. This fusion of wealth and beauty is certainly not equivalent to an ‘economic’ account of maximum exploitation opportunities. Such a fusion is in fact characteristic of official Soviet accounts of nature. But it is also characteristic of the way *jailoos* are appreciated for fattening livestock, its health-giving properties and as a realm of *tazalyk* and *taza* Kyrgyzzness (which is not the same as *Kyrgyzchylyk*).

There are plenty of situations in which the opportunities a place offers are assessed in

¹¹⁶ *Ketmen-Töbö*: old name for Toktogul valley

terms of resources, such as how good the water supply is, how rich the soil, how harsh the winter. After all, even *mazars* like *Baibiche Bulak* give water to feed people, livestock and crops. In the case of *jailoos*, I have argued that they are better understood not just as ‘economy’, not even just as moral economy but as moral geography. I have argued that the *jailoo* ‘hosts’ certain features such as water, *tazalyk*, Kyrgyzzness, health and wealth in livestock and foods, and that these features can also re-appear in other lived places, such as gigantic dam projects or sites of worship and healing. I have argued that it is the *jailoo* as the source of all these qualities that makes Saikal Apa’s, and many other people’s eyes, light up at the thought of it.

How Matter matters and affects Ownership of *Jailoos*, Dams and *Mazars*

Property, particularly in the guise of agricultural land, has been something of an obsession for scholars of post-Socialism. Ethnographies of privatization, specifically of collective farms, abound (including Hann 2003, Dunn 2004, Verdery 2003, Humphrey and Verdery 2004, Kerven 2003, Trevisani 2007). Insofar as conceiving of something as owned makes it into a commodity, land is a strange object: it can neither be ‘moved around’ like a commodity, nor has it been created (though it may be changed or cared for) by humans and thus given value (Helgason and Palsson 1997: 455-6). The ethnographies on privatization generally conceive of property as a ‘bundle of rights’ or social entitlements (Hann 1998: 7). There has been a justified fascination with how, as Alexander puts it ‘*the process of privatization signals a fundamental reworking of the role of the state, and the role of ‘the people’ or an individual in relation to it*’ (Alexander 2004: 256). This reworking also implies that objects like dams or *jailoos* become objects of very different kinds. I have argued that at present, ‘spiritual owners’ (*ee*) in Kyrgyzstan are only actively engaged with at *mazars*, nodes of sentience. We have seen that in the pre-Soviet era pastures were associated with and contested by patrilineal groups (and their allies), headed by a patriarchal leader. Since recent attempts to legislate for pastures being formally leased have largely failed, the sense of entitlement to a common good prevails among pasture-users.

The leverage Toktogul residents have in asserting themselves against, or bypassing legislation and state powers are far greater in the case of *jailoos* than in the case of dams. The materiality, the concentration of expertise and material (concrete, water, electricity) at dams contrasts with the expansiveness of pastures across vast areas: each enables and

disables different relations between citizens, and between citizens and state actors. If technologies have their own scripts (Schnitzler 2010:9), so does the materiality of particular places: they can be operated on, owned, and lived in very different ways. What I am suggesting is a materialism that allows different places to have different kinds of possibilities, or environmental ‘affordances’ (cf. Gibson 1979: 18). This does not amount to material determinism. Human geographers like Rose have emphasized that far from being apolitical, ‘*space is practised, a matrix of play but not infinitely plastic, because saturated with power*’ (Rose 1999: 249). I would like to add that space is not infinitely plastic, because it is *material*, and as such, an intervention in what humans think and do.

As the example of Inner Mongolia described by Williams demonstrates, the *kind* of state also plays a role: the disjunction between government policies and pastoralist practices is less damaging to pastoralists in Kyrgyzstan than in Inner Asia, because of the weak ‘hold’ of the law. In the case of *jailoos*, ‘state property’ shows itself mostly as ‘common’ or public property, while access and benefits of the dam are closely controlled by a small group of state actors: here ‘state property’ means something more akin to ‘private property of the state’. The resentment Toktogul residents feel about the old dam is to do with their exclusion from state property conceived as a common good (submerged land, cheap electricity) and the pride people like Maksat feel has to do with participation in building a common good. Since the monopoly of the state and ‘remote’ companies over hydropower are so overwhelming, citizen groups rarely even attempt the path of litigation or argument over entitlements, which are so common over privatized agricultural land.

Therefore, the move to withdraw overt state control in the case of dams and *jailoos* is likely to have hugely different outcomes: in the case of the dam, it allows state agencies to opt out of responsibilities towards citizens in terms of cheap electricity rates, and yet allow it to fully profit as a stakeholder. In the case of *jailoos*, handing over control to ‘pasture associations’ and village councils is likely to diminish state profits.

Mazars meanwhile stand in an oblique relationship to the state: issues of ownership are muted here, it is issues of efficacy (to believe, to support or not) that are in the forefront here: in consequence, the Kyrgyzstani state has made only limited efforts to transform the efficacy of *mazars* into state powers anchored in nationalism, like at Manas Ordo. The secularist state has difficulty in relating to *mazars* and the associated practices, because *mazars* are more or less associated with Islam, with which the Kyrgyz state has a highly ambiguous relationship itself: handing out accreditations to imams through the state muftiat

on the one hand, on the other seeking to suppress so-called ‘wahabists’ associated with terrorism and challenges to state authority. The state needs to transform *mazars* into something else, such as the international currency of nationalism, before it becomes an ideological ‘resource’ for the state. This is also an awkward move for state actors because the efficacy of *mazars*, the ‘truth’ of these places (a dimension taken for granted in *jailoos* and dams) and *how* these places are *really* powerful, is not universally accepted.

Although I did not detect an overarching technology of ‘managing’ natural or ‘emplaced’ forces, nevertheless, there were particularly *good* places: those that had *taza* water, air and entire environment and way of life like *jailoos*, the blessing of miraculous and mysterious enspirited *mazars*, or the breath-taking power of the Toktogul dam, which establishes Kyrgyzstan as a powerful regional force, capable of holding Uzbekistan to ransom. As I have mentioned, there was also a scale of ‘cultivation’ according to which places were judged: those villages that offered a kind climate for agriculture, asphalted roads and good access to the local market and education.

As I have argued, the term *yiik* (‘sacred’, ‘holy’) is only applied to a very narrow range of places called *mazars*. But we have seen that places such as the dam or *jailoo* can be objects of awe, and treasured in other modes. There are threads that connect these different modes of veneration such as the Manas Ordo patronized by the government, or the new dam named *Kambar Ata*.

Certainly, it seems the enspirited, the resource- or development-oriented and the health-giving environment perspectives seem to co-exist, in most cases without great conflict (unlike Humphrey’s ‘shamanic’ and ‘chiefly’ landscapes in Mongolia). They are able to do so because each is associated with distinctly different places and distinctly different forms of interaction: *mazars*, dams and *jailoos*. There is evidence of this in the very distinctive vocabulary associate with *mazars* (*küch*, *ee*), that would sound quite odd if applied to *jailoos* or dams. Significantly, since *jailoos* bring together elements of all three ways of thinking, and different kinds of actors, these are the places that are most generally understood to be significant for Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, the presence of water, and the value of *tazalyk* and wealth through different channels (blessings, state subsidies, grazing) are present in all three, providing an over-arching element of viewing otherwise very heterodox entities.

I will expand on the discourse on *kul’tura* as a measure for valuing places in the following chapter. Pastoral *jailoos* and industrial dams then appear as poles, according to different regimes or frames of value. I will also examine the fusing of certain places with

certain periods, delving more deeply into the history of dams and *jailoos*, as well as other places featuring in personal biographies, such as the migrant destination of Turkey. I will reveal in each case that these places are subject to particular chronopolitics, evident for example in the regularly broadcast celebration of the Kambar Ata project on TV, which blends images of traditional bards with heavy industry. In doing so, I will also address Toktogul residents' experience of different kinds of movement and the possible link between place and memory that I intimated in discussing the *Baibiche Bulak*. Finally, this next section will bring us full circle to the issue of belonging, though this time not in the strictly proprietorial sense of control over things and people, but rather as a sense of *communitas*.

Section II: Timing Places



Figure 16: View of Bel Aldy in early spring

On a warm day in March 2008, I climb the steep pasture above Bel Aldy to sit and look, as is my habit. Knowing how much will flower in the summer makes March an impatient wait: the snow recedes slowly, the land lies dead with grey-yellow hair, and the fat spiny chunks of *chaiir* just don't seem to grow. By May they will have shot up two metres tall and unfolded into a small tree with yellow buds that turn to dry brown seed pods later. A good show of *chaiir* indicates a good year for the beekeepers. Their brittle trunks are the last of the summer landscape left by the November snows.

Having lived here all year, looking around reminds me of what I have learnt. The name Bel Aldy - 'we reached the pass' - is fitting, for ahead across the flat fields looms a wall of green and white crags, the hills behind me stepping down to the large reservoir occupying the centre of Toktogul district. The boulderous river below the escarpment of the village is the source of our water, which children, donkeys and horses carry uphill. The boys like to splash about in it in the summer, but it also regularly costs somebody their life. There used to be a lovely forest next to the river to have picnics in, until an earthquake in 1992 filled the riverbed with rubble and the village with ruins. Bel Aldy's orchards, barns and mud-brick

houses all lie together on the flat shelf above, but until electricity lines arrived in the 1960s, the village was much less condensed. And before that, well, I can pinpoint a few sites of the *boz üi* of great men.

The fields that once housed buildings now show up as 'white land' (*ak jer*), poor material for agriculture. But the 'black land' (*kara jer*) where the animals were stabled, is full of the manure of that era. The land is good enough to grow wheat, but since the *sovkhos* combine harvester disappeared, wheat is no longer worth the trouble. Instead, potatoes, sunflowers and maize shoot up between April and September. The winter pastures catch two months more snow than the Korosh *uruu*'s former home in the wide-open valley below us. But the spring, summer and autumn pastures must have been plentiful and offered access to the famous high plain of *Suusamir* and opportunities to mingle with Kazakhs and other northern Kyrgyz. I can see the tracks for heavy vehicles to move up to the pastures, which still seam the mountainsides, but they have deteriorated badly so the pastures can now only be accessed on horseback.

When Saikal Apa was young, everyone lived in mud-brick, one or two-roomed houses with flat reed roofs. Some people still occupy these, though many are now used as stables instead. Most people have built themselves larger houses, with gabled roofs and white-washed walls, net curtains and a side-board full of memorabilia. There is a third type of house with a history: small boxy wood or brick buildings funded by foreign aid agencies are a reminder of the 1992 earthquake. Some people have not managed to build a more durable house yet.

The houses with their generous fields and gardens are screened off from the thoroughfare by poplars, apple and apricot trees, hawthorn hedges or fences constructed from ex-farm machinery. In Saikal Apa's youth there were almost no trees in the village, and nobody had the extensive vegetable gardens that make potting in the autumn such a big job. '*The Russians taught us about gardening*', she tells me. The village roads are dust in summer and mud, slush and ice the rest of the time, much regretted by in-marrying women from more 'civilized' villages. The village school, a couple of small stores selling sugar and tea, cigarettes, drinks and headscarves line the road. At the southern tip of the village lies the main cemetery, only to be visited on anniversaries and *Eskerüü*: Remembrance Day. The newest feature to catch the eye is the mosque, its recently completed aluminium roof shining in the sun like no other in the village. The local funders hope that the building will soon attract more than the usual trickle of devout elders and dedicated young men.

The description above invokes many kinds of knowledge about the passing of time and changes in the landscape: seasons, group migrations, the coming of electricity and planned villages, natural disasters, changes in life-style, days of the dead, the quality of being civilized or otherwise, the deteriorating infrastructure since the demise of the Soviet Union. This was the pattern of time I experienced during my fieldwork. It is hardly necessary to point out how intimately connected all these views of the past are to a sense of place. In the following section I interrogate how these different elements, past experiences and events, concepts of relatedness and obligation, remembrance and aspirations for the future such as ‘becoming cultured’ shape people’s moral geographies. The past turns up as precious experiences to be treasured and reproduced if possible, but also as suffering that may threaten again in the future. These threads of relating to past and future also translate into particular ideas about the kind of place one lives in, and what other places are like: they are situated not only in a geographical, but also a temporal imagination. How these places are ‘timed’ leads me to the question how people relate to and use the past.

Needless to say, had I been another person, grown up in the village, not had a scholarly interest in these changes, my thoughts on looking across the valley would have been quite different. If I was an elder like Saikal Apa looking back over my family’s fate in the course of the twentieth century upheavals, I might always have a resentful or regretful eye on a certain piece of land I cannot reclaim, or I might marvel, as she does, at the profound changes in living conditions and occupation that the Socialist way brought: vegetable gardens, electricity in every house, several schools in view, a concrete bridge. My vision is perhaps most akin to that of a newly arrived wife and daughter-in-law (*kelin*), slowly learning who is who and how all these elements fit together. But unlike an in-marrying *kelin*, for me this may be the first and last time I can watch the *chhair* grow. Although I have shared times and experienced places together with Saikal Apa and others, the way I am inserted in these times, here, is quite different.

Place and Time

This chapter deepens the questions raised about *jailoos*, dams and *mazars* along a temporal axis: I ask how people insert themselves and the places familiar to them, in a temporal moral geography. In chapter one I reviewed the arguments for the interdependence and connectivity of place and time. We have seen that theorists like Gosden, Ingold, Bender

or Massey advocate understanding places as processes, as something that is done ('performed') rather than mutely being acted *on*. However, rather than fusing place and time entirely, as *rhythm*, an investigation into how people map times and places onto each other, requires keeping time and place apart as analytical categories. I aim to show how, as De Certeau and Giard put it, '*stories make, organize and link places*' (1998: 115). Further, Massey has pointed out that the 'local' is a product of contacts with other places (Massey 1995: 183). For this reason, this chapter features the *jailoos*, dams and *mazars* already encountered, but also villages like Bel Aldy and how people conceive of and act on their relations with urban and foreign locations.

The perspective on place as performance also throws new light on the question of agency. If '*a landscape is the most solid appearance in which a history can declare itself*' (Inglis 1977: 489 in Ingold 200: 198) and if '*every object is a collapsed act*' (Ingold 2000: 198) then such objects are as much historical beings as human subjects are (Latour 1993: 85). Such a conceit is curiously close to an archaeological view of landscape as a palimpsest, a quasi-textual record to be 'read'. My concern here is an ethnographic one: in what sense and in how far can such a performative, or archaeological vision accord with the local understanding of different places such as Bel Aldy, or the Toktogul dam? In how far are they conceived as having a 'deep' or 'shallow' history, in how far are they conceived as existing in co-eval, yet different times? How strongly, and by what means are people, places, histories and futures linked? As Pinney has pointed out in the case of Hindu villages in India, temporal and geographic fusions and oppositions are lived out, and as such, become part of people's sense of self and aspirations (Pinney 1995: 88).

Is it always the case that '*to perceive the landscape is an act of remembrance*' (Ingold 2000: 183)? Is it always the case in the same way? Certainly European memorials to wars and the Holocaust at first glance have a similar function to Western Apache attachment of moral stories to specific sites (Basso 1990). However, the *kinds* of time these two ethnographic examples evoke are quite different: the Western Apache stories are full of personal detail while chronology, how remote or near the event was temporally to the teller of the tale, is not significant. As Schama describes the war monuments of Polish forests, they acknowledge extraordinary individual acts and the names and dates of murdered people (Schama 1995: 25). In contrast to Schama's reading of the Polish forests, early American settlers did not have an 'archaeological' view of landscape. Lowenthal describes how in the early years of the United States, landscape came to be a substitute for a public and celebratory history. The

‘primeval’ forest, ‘cathedrals’ of Redwood glades and Indians cast variously as ‘prehistoric’ savages, Greek or Roman nobles were made to stand in contrast to Europe as a very young and very old nation (Lowenthal 1976: 102-5).

These examples show that the timing of places is an aspect of how they carry meaning. But they also show that the concepts of time and space these acts of remembrance work with cannot be assumed to be the same. I will discuss how these dynamics play in Central Asia, ancient cradle of high civilizations, Silk Roads and nomad conquerors, and more specifically in the Toktogul valley. As I will show, these narratives are not univocal, and places like Bel Aldy hardly unambiguous, firstly because I am dealing with the views of a variety of people and secondly because neither the meaning of a place or of a past event can be ‘fixed’. Nevertheless, there are ‘strong’ models of narration such as those of a new nation-state, that I will discuss below.

Commemorations Personal and Public

How do private biographies link to grand narratives, to ‘public history’ and different registers of relating to the past and future such as epics, nostalgia, concepts of tradition or modern development plans? I here describe the kind of relationships people create between past, present and future as ‘temporality’ (Ox and Gingrich 2002: S3). What do people think the point of recalling the past is? How do you *do* remembering, and what kind of non-narrative forms of commemoration such as ritual or marks in the landscape are available?¹¹⁷ What do ways of relating to past and future tell us about people’s sense of their own role, the agency of individuals or groups such as *uruus* in affecting the course of events? And how do these roles link back to the timing of places and moral geographies? In the following, I will treat commemorating as a communication process that importantly also takes place between

¹¹⁷ Although I do not have the space to deal with wider questions on the anthropology of time here, the literature on these includes Bloch 1977, Appadurai 1981, Munn 1992, Gell 1992, Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, James and Mills 2005. Since I share some of Stewart’s doubts about studying ‘memory’ as interior, or collective and unconscious (2004: 574), I here deal with explicitly commemorative practices such as narration, instead of ‘memory’. Further, I refer to the ‘past’ when speaking of lived or told experiences, and to ‘history’, when the past becomes part of public life (e.g. memorial feasts within a family, state museums and education). I also treat ‘tradition’ as a locally relevant category, as my Kyrgyz interlocutors suggested, rather than an analytical term opposed to ‘history’. I do not mean to establish an *analytic* dichotomy between ‘Kyrgyz’ tradition and ‘Soviet modernity’, or to imply that whatever is Soviet does not belong to a Kyrgyz person: on the contrary.

speaker and listener. I hope the way I have dealt with the following life-histories allows the individuals whose lives I discuss here to be *both* representative, recognizable as sharing some experiences and ways of talking about them, as well as being more than ‘types’ such as ‘old *kulak*’ or ‘young *kelin*’.¹¹⁸

It is possible to understand people’s relations with time as insisting on particular kinds of stabilities and continuities or stressing particular kinds of change. ‘Continuity and change’ are also the binaries historians wrestle with, reappearing in other guises to anthropologists as the need for opportunity and security, difference and sameness, the individual and collective. In chapter 5, I begin by focusing on elements of the past that people value and uphold as evidence of continuity, in particular the master epic *Manas*, kinship through patrilineal descent and ‘blood’. I discuss significant moments in individual biographies, such as work, travel and marriage and reflect on gender differences in the telling. I ask whether and how people find the landscape ‘memorious’ in the way Schama, Basso or Lowenthal suggest.

In chapter 6 I move on to the puzzlements and hopes of change people are confronted with. I discuss events of the twentieth century that affected people widely: collectivization, privatization and the inexplicably sudden demise of the Soviet Union. In both biographies and accounts of these events, the Soviet era looms large as the relevant other. But while such a segmented opposition may look very static, I will show that these period ‘zones’ in fact reveal a very dynamic sense of the rise and decline of civilizations, of a mutability that people have to deal with. I will argue that this segmentation and nostalgic accounts are a form of judging the present in relation to lived (and imagined) past and future. People’s accounts of their recent Soviet life are also a means of refusing to consign lives that were committed to a different order to the rubbish heap of history.

I show how such temporal ‘segmentation’ is related to the common collapsing of different times and places such as *jailoos*, dams, villages and ‘abroad’. I examine how the story of ‘becoming cultured’ plays in new kinds of work biographies: those of migrants. From this, I pass on to the reasons for certain silences, and other ways of commemorating than relating the past as a story. Finally, I analyse if and how these different registers of commemoration intersect: the function of history as comparison, narratives of becoming cultured and the emphasis on personal connections through descent. As any ethnography, my account of these patterns is a snapshot from the mid to late 2000s. The conversation about

¹¹⁸ *Kulak*: (Russian) early Socialist term for rich peasant, member of the exploiting classes.

what ‘blood’ is, how far in the future or past Moscow is, and whether *jailoos* maintain their ‘eternity’, continues.

This section is not intended as a study of state discourse on history, nor an analysis of current Kyrgyz historiography.¹¹⁹ I only relate to these where I see them intersecting with the ideas and lives of the people heard in these pages. Senses of time generated by everyday rhythms such as household tasks, new year celebrations, expectations of the life-course or the relations between generations are also beyond the scope of this chapter. Some of these aspects are addressed in chapters 7 and 8. In conversation with people in Kyrgyzstan about history, I was for a long time after ‘facts’: attempting to relate official history to their lives. In reflecting on these conversations, I realized that it is much more interesting, and a better kind of listening, to attend to the *myths people live by*, the categories and narratives available for the telling (Thompson 2000: 166) than attempting triangulations of oral and written sources.

In all of the above discussion, the past is treated as a resource, which is *used*. Since the human past consists of the sum of human experience, I do not think this is an adequate representation, powerful though it is in facilitating a political view of historiography. But in relations to bad times and deaths one has survived, the idiom of *using* this experience appears rather limited, even cynical. If I interpret people’s accounts of the past in a certain way, my aims rarely coincide with the aims of many contemporary Kyrgyz historians. For example, Anvar Mokeev says of history that it should: ‘*help answer the question of who are we, fresh in independence*’ (Mokeev 2008) It is clear from my discussion that I do not think ‘history’ (which history?) tells ‘us’ (which ‘us’?) who we are in an unmediated fashion. But, as with the case of the materiality of dams, *jailoos* and *mazars*, nor do I think the stories we can tell are arbitrary either, that they have nothing to do with the ‘material’ of experience, whether of personal biography or the epic *Manas*. In taking such a position I clearly critique the kind of ‘history as identity’ legitimation and use of history that many of my Kyrgyz colleagues are interested in. The same is true of deconstructing the idea of ‘blood’ and *sanjira*, of critiquing people’s aspirations to *kul’tura* and cosmopolitan travel. What consequences and responsibilities does such a critique entail? I am not at all sure what effect my witnessing, my listening to people’s stories has had.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ For these kinds of studies, see Abazov 2008, Beyer 2010, Gullette 2006, Tchorev 2002. In other Central Asian contexts see Suyarkulova forthcoming, Dave 2007.

¹²⁰ This question has been raised elsewhere, for example by K. S. Brown (2000).

Chapter 5: Coping with Continuity between Epic and Biography

This chapter inquires into the ways that people highlight continuity with the past, particularly in relation to kinship through descent, and an associated idea of ‘blood’. I discuss how heroic figures such as Manas are commemorated, as well as more ordinary and intimate older relatives. I then examine how individuals might recount their own lives, and whether they use other registers than those of heroic events or connecting to dead forebears. All these narratives reveal understandings of *how* history happens, who or what generates change and continuity. I further examine how people recognize or perform the passing (or freezing) of time in landscape features. This also has implications for entitlements to resources, as I will show, which is just one aspect of ‘timed’ moral geographies.

The people in these pages are mostly elderly men and women, who undoubtedly made their choices about what they thought a young foreigner might be able to, or need to understand. They surely considered conventions about what is appropriate and good to talk about between men and women of different ages. Sharing intimate feelings with a young woman might be quite embarrassing to older men. What these elders related to me first, when I asked about ‘history’, were genealogies, and it is these that I turn to now.

Commemorating Family: Honouring Ancestors and Genealogy (*Sanjira*)

When I asked about the history of Bel Aldy, I was usually told to visit various *aksakal*, who would then proceed to relate the sons and sons of sons of their *uruu* and what they had done. Here is the village genealogy (*sanjira*), as told by the *aksakal* Kadyrbek Ata and my host father Tolkunbek:

Kadyrbek Ata: *‘Two hundred years. For about two hundred years this village has been known as Bel Aldy. Our ancestors named this place Bel Aldy. ... A person called Jumake had three sons. The eldest son’s name was Shükiür, the second was Birke, the third Kojoberdi. Those three sons quarrelled with their uruu, the Seiit, who were living in Ketmen-Töbö. ... So they left and came here. Kojoberdi came here, slaughtered a mare. “Let’s call this place Bol-Aldy [We were divided], they said. Or “let’s name this place Bel Aldy [we reached the pass] as this is the foot of a pass.” ... Shükiür had three sons: Bekuluu,*

Baimyrza, Satybaldy. ... Baimyrza had a son named Yman [Kadyrbek lists further generations of male descendants] In other words we are connected after four fathers with them [my host father Tolkunbek]. ... Our uruu is called Korosh. For Tolkunbek, eleven fathers pass before reaching Korosh. So many generations.

Tolkunbek: Those who live in Bel Aldy are called Korosh. They are all from one father.

Kadyrbek Ata: Here in Toktogul district most people belong to the Tungatar. There are also many people that belong to the Tunto. And there are a few Kutunai. They are Korosh's father's father. There are more Korosh in Komsomol, near Toktogul. ... See, so many people came from only two siblings. Here in Bel Aldy, the Korosh all came from Shükür and Birke, from two people! That's how the number of people is growing.'

When I asked a well-respected teacher why an *uruu* was important, she was a little taken aback by the naivety of my question: ‘*if there was no uruu, there would be no people (el)!*’ she answered. She then went on to tell me about her children and siblings, and where they were all living. An *uruu* (also *uruk*, and *chong uruu*) denotes a patrilineal descent groups, in principal exogamous, that often clusters in certain areas. As far as we know, in pre-Soviet times *uruu* were stateless and relatively egalitarian entities with a male hierarchy of leaders (*biis*, *bais* or *manaps*). This leadership status is variously reported as being asserted through violent struggle, inherited, reached by popular acclaim or election (Gullette 2006:80-4). The relevant size of *uruu* referred to depends on the context, so for example Kadyrbek and Tolkunbek are both Korosh, but Kadyrbek is also of the smaller Shygai division, and Tolkunbek from the Shükür. The Seeit, from whom Korosh descended, are not relevant in everyday life anymore and only remembered by people like Kadyrbek. So the *uruu* is a relatively fluid category that is activated for life-cycle rituals, to invoke kinship obligations or simply to establish amicable relations with a stranger.¹²¹

¹²¹ *Uruu* and its variants are often translated into Russian as *plemia* and *rod*, and into English as ‘clan’ and ‘tribe’. As all these translations are problematic, I will simply use the Kyrgyz term. It is likely that at least the political life of *uruus* has been inflected by Soviet and Russian notions of tribes and nations, and a tsarist administration that drew on *biis* as tax collectors and judges (cf. Beyer 2010: 50-2). The popular interest in *sanjira* has long been paralleled by an interest in the ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz by Russian scholars, and it is also a prominent current discussion point among historians of Kyrgyzstan (Mokeev 2008).

As Kadyrbek relates it, everyone in this hamlet is descended from the same group of brothers. However, there are in fact people that have been ‘added’, who now identify themselves as Korosh. Incorporating Kyrgyz of other descent lines, and indeed non-Kyrgyz in the ideology of one patriline is quite typical: ‘*Although people did remember their ancestry very precisely, if they had been incorporated into a more powerful group, it was not always in the interests of their status in that group to remember too overtly their outside connections*’ (Bunn 2000: 114).

Indeed, it is bad manners (*uiat*) to remind others of originally being from elsewhere. It shows up the sadness, vulnerability and shame of not knowing exactly where they came from or who their fathers are. I only learnt of such inconsistencies when someone wanted to stress *not* belonging. One acquaintance, himself of ‘dubious’ origin, warned that your ‘alien’ origins might be brought up if your family behaved badly. My neighbour Aijamal explained that the everyday tactfulness about the origin of others was about preserving unity (*birimdik*) and *yntymak*: cordial, friendly relations. She elaborated that ‘*you have to take someone in who is new, otherwise they are alone: who will come to their funeral, and help them?*’ Having weak family ties or being an orphan may make one dependent on people who might not treat you as kin, a situation associated with slavery.¹²² Ruslan, a young collector of Korosh *sanjira* commented that in the past: ‘*without relatives, you were a kul [slave]: you could be banished by a bii anytime*’.

This sense of kinship can also play a role in the relationship between individuals and state actors such as province governors, creating bonds and loyalties appreciated as the *yntymak* of one’s own relations, and denounced as *koruptsiia* in others. In local council elections, strength often lies in numbers: small *uruus* cannot hope to have a candidate elected as mayor, however capable. These dynamics also cause concern: the Tulip revolution in 2005 and demonstrations of 2010 were largely catalyzed by public anger at government nepotism. In the aftermath of the Tulip revolution, power-holders and opposition were locked in a politically paralyzing, and often violent conflict. As Kadyrbek Ata put it: ‘*the Kyrgyz’ rivalry with each other makes them a danger to themselves*’. This situation is sometimes described as the rise of ‘*traibalizm*’ and ‘clan’ politics in the region (Schatz 2004, Collins 2006, Jones-Luong 2002). However, such profiteering networks of elites are better described as patron-client networks (Ismailbekova: forthcoming). Although often *uruu* membership or kinship language, conflated with regional affiliations, are used for political purposes, attempts to

¹²² For more on the idea of kinship and slavery in the context of work, see chapter 7.

make *uruu* membership the sole basis of political parties have certainly failed (Gullette 2006: 54, Beyer 2010: 144) Appealing to *uruu* members is one political tool among others. It would be a distortion to claim that this is *all* Kyrgyz value *sanjira* for. Ruslan claimed *uruus* were irrelevant in current affairs, but at the same time insisted on the duty to remember family ties and fathers:

'It's important to know your ancestors because it is forbidden to marry for seven generations in the father's line. Knowing your sanjira is also about honouring your relatives and forebears. ... Sanjirachi [genealogists] used to be respected as sages. But now there's no interest in these things, uruus are not 'aktualnii.'

Although Ruslan is right that *uruus* are not '*aktualnii*' in that it is not *uruus* and their leaders that rule the state, yet *uruus* are not politically irrelevant. As well as the patron-client networks mentioned above, *uruu* was sometimes the basis on which land and other entitlements were distributed when collective farms were dissolved in the 90s (Reynolds forthcoming, Beyer 2010: 87).

How to '*honour your relatives and forebears*', as Ruslan recommends? He mentions that people should know their 'seven fathers' (*jeti ata*). Many people are in fact a little embarrassed that they do not, but they can always consult an elder like Kadyrbek if need be. Ruslan also insisted on the need to maintain links to his ancestors' *tuulgan jer* (birthplace, homeland). This association of place and ancestors however does not imply the notion of ancestors actually *becoming* the land.¹²³ Most households give pride of place to dignified portraits of patrilineal parents or grandparents on parlour walls, above the most prized carpet hanging. It is also good to visit the graves of dead relatives and say a prayer, particularly on the Day of Remembrance (*Eskerüü*). Funerals and the series of memorial feasts or wakes that follow, after seven and forty days, after a year, all require large groups of relatives, neighbours and friends to participate. Passing any grave or graveyard, most people will call for a blessing (*bata*) by passing their hands over their face and perhaps murmuring a short prayer. It is not only disgraceful but also potentially dangerous not to give the dead their due.

¹²³ The word *tuulgan jer* is not unambiguous: it can refer to the person's own birth place, their father's or grandfather's, which can all be completely different. I take Ruslan's statement as an encouragement to cultivate relations with the *uruu* relatives, to visit wherever they mainly reside.

People can feel cautious around the dead, be reluctant to enter graveyards, and want to make sure the *arbak* of the dead give blessings rather than curses for being properly respected and put to rest.¹²⁴ Although I find the interpretation of these practices as ancestor worship problematic, for the reasons discussed in chapter 4, it is not problematic to describe them as commemorations, as a kind of history. In this respect, commemorating direct ancestors at home or at their graves is different from visiting *mazars*, which I argued do not require knowledge of their past or connections to historic persons for their efficacy.

People often expect the most reliable and relevant kin to come from the male side. Paternal grandparents have a privileged claim on grandchildren and are expected to be closer to them than maternal grandparents, though of course this is subject to individual circumstance and dispositions. This puts women, who usually move into the husband's household, in a rather ambiguous and fragile position. A young bride is called a *kelin*, literally an 'in-comer'. When hosting in-laws and blood relations, it is the in-laws who receive the greatest attention and respect, precisely because these bonds are considered more fragile. Perhaps it was partly the desire to overcome 'incomer' status, to anchor themselves that made widows speak often and with evident emotion of their dead husbands, in my experience much more frequently than widowers. Although it is clear that this kind of sharing was also more comfortable among women, it was also a reminder of their stand in the village polity, according to their husband's position and role. Another factor that made women talk more about their dead is perhaps that formal funeral laments (*koshok*) are performed by women alone. I will return to such gender differences in discussing biographies below.

Before the commemoration of descent appears too weighty a factor in Kyrgyz social life, it should be made clear that anniversaries of all kinds such as birthdays, weddings, school graduations are widely celebrated and important to archive in family albums, portraits, army scrapbooks and videos. The fact of having been at school together, serving together in the army or working together frequently becomes a life-long claim people have on each other. Each time, toasts will emphasize *birimdik* and *yntymak*.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ *Arbak* are also the spirits of heroes visiting a *manaschi*, or non-human spirits that help or oppose a healer.

¹²⁵ I will return to how people toast and bless each other in chapter 8.

‘Water flows in its Channels’: Blood and Nation

Beyond these kinds of groups, I found broader categories of relatedness were also called on, namely what people called ‘blood’ (*kan*). Here are some examples of how people used this idea:

- a) One friend had been married to a man who went on to commit homicide after their divorce. She was very worried about her daughter carrying this kind of criminal potential in her blood.

- b) Describing his own sub-*uruu*, a biologist said they had strong genes, for after dekulakization it had only taken them two generations to become rich again. He used the phrase '*akkan ariktan, suu agat*' (‘water flows in its channels’) to explain this phenomenon. He explained it was their genotype to be ambitious and strive, while another sub-*uruu* (who were actually quite powerful at the time of our conversation) were ‘slaves’.

- c) A history teacher explained to me that the Kyrgyz are genetically related to the Azeris, Kazakhs and Uyghurs: ‘*they are like brothers, they all have Alexander's blood*’ (referring to Alexander the Great). She thought Uzbeks and Kyrgyz do not like each other, because they are of different blood and look different.

On other occasions, people learning that I was an anthropologist of British/German extraction sought to establish blood links between us, perhaps citing new research on TV that showed that the Kyrgyz and Germans or ‘Saxons’ were of the same blood. This emphasis was likely encouraged if I presented myself as an *antropolog*, which in the Soviet era meant someone with an interest in ethnogenesis.¹²⁶ I found people made quite ambiguous statements about the value or dangers of mixing ‘peoples’ (Kyrgyz singular *el*), which in the examples

¹²⁶ I was always quite uncomfortable with this talk of ‘blood’, ironically very much so because of the ‘collective guilt’ of my German ‘blood’ for the murderous racism of the Third Reich. In light of these ‘blood’ politics and after I found several people assumed that being German I shared their anti-Semitism, I sometimes played down my Germaness.

above, are associated with common descent.¹²⁷ It was good if the person could be incorporated, if ‘*the foreign spouse learned Kyrgyz*’, if ‘*our daughter doesn’t move so far away*’. Marriage and a growing population were quite often discussed as a way of making the Kyrgyz a great *el* again. On the other hand I heard approving comments on people of mixed blood (*metis*) being more intelligent. Several men drew analogies between the need to infuse new blood in a herd of horses by swapping out the stallion every few years to prevent inbreeding, and the need to marry outside the patriline. A local historian insisted that the Kyrgyz were a ‘polyethnic’ (*polietnichnii*) people, that it is necessary to mix blood to avoid ‘degeneration’. He said it was like water, blood has to flow, otherwise you get ‘stagnant pools’.¹²⁸

But a *metis* background could equally be interpreted negatively: on other occasions, people expressed the need to guard against Kyrgyz individuals being taken away from their *el*, way of life and language. Like Bunn, I often encountered the idea that the Kyrgyz were a very old people, and approval of being pure (*taza*) Kyrgyz (Bunn 2000: 113). Since people discussed humans as animals in this context, it is also relevant that some Soviet-educated agronomists deplored the fact that breeds were no longer kept pure (*tazakanduu*: ‘clean blooded’) for good quality wool and meat.¹²⁹

The idea of ‘blood’ I encountered is both about transmitting psychological traits within a family line, explaining differences or commonalities as well as a way of establishing well-intentioned relations.¹³⁰ Had I been Kyrgyz, the relevant level of seeking common ancestry would have been the *uruu*, rather than blood. Blood requires good management, for example in a horse herd, in marrying outside the patriline, or preserving certain positive

¹²⁷ Reeves also notes that a mixed heritage can be viewed as blessed ‘cosmopolitanism’ or cursed ‘rootlessness’ (Reeves 2007a: 161) Kamp relates an instance where a prominent Uzbek woman ‘attributed her own strength to being ‘mestizo’ combining Afghan and Xorazm influences (Kamp 2001: 56).

Note the conflation of *el* and *uruu* here. *El* is also used to translate the Russian terms *narod* or *natsiia* (nation), *narodnost’* (a people), *natsional’nost* (nationality). Alternative terms for nationality are *ulutuk*, the root of which means ‘son’ and *mamleket* (also ‘state’). The distinctions between these was long debated by Bolshevik activists and ethnographers alike (Hirsch 2005: 42). Stalin finally defined a nation as having a territory, language and national consciousness in common. In Soviet censuses of Central Asia using these categories impacted how borders were drawn between new republics, languages and titular nationalities (Hirsch 2005: 160).

¹²⁸ Note again the emphasis on the flow of water discussed in chapter 3.

¹²⁹ ‘Blood’ as breed is downplayed in other contexts, such as saying a horse is a Kyrgyz horse if it is a good horse (strong, skilled, beautiful) (Cassidy 2009).

¹³⁰ See also my discussion of artistic talent as inheritance in chapter 8.

identities. What Edwards has discussed in relation to a Lancashire town also holds true in Bel Aldy: how the past is mobilized in forming senses of belonging and affiliation (she calls it identity and community) is contingent (Edwards 1998: 148). And making connections always entails breaking connections too, for example to a woman's natal family (Edwards 1998: 155).



Figure 17: Statue of Manas in front of Bishkek Philharmonia

The Movers and Shakers of History

The hero (*baatyr*) Manas is often considered the ancestor of all Kyrgyz and is celebrated in the recitation of the Manas epic by a *manaschi*. The spirit of Manas and his forty heroes work on Manas-tellers to force them to tell this powerful history of his exploits: victorious battles, friendships, feuds and smart and beautiful women. Like shamans, many *manaschis* experience an illness in their youth, and only recover when they start to tell Manas. The most respected kind of *manaschi* does not learn the text from a book; his knowledge is the effect of spiritual guidance. Egemberdieva likens the Manas epic to the

Bible and Koran, as the ancient roots of a particular civilization, which she describes as nomadic (Egemberdieva: 2005). Since every *manaschi* is inspired differently, no two renditions are alike. At the same time, because Manas has been recorded and appeared in print since the mid-19th century, it is often treated as a single authoritative text (for example in Hatto 1989: xv). People often stressed the *truth* of Manas to me, that he is neither a fairy-tale nor long dead and gone. They also stressed the Kyrgyzness of Manas, although early recordings are not very clear about this. The 1000th anniversary of Manas and the 3000th anniversary of the city of Osh were engineered in the mid-90s as nation-building vehicles, taking a common (ethnicized) history as the foundation of the state. Although the ascription to one ethnicity of a central state symbol is problematic in a multi-ethnic state, children learn the ‘seven principles of Manas’ at school. These principles stress national unity, generous and tolerant humanism, friendship and cooperation among nations, harmony with nature, hard work, education, and defending the Kyrgyz state (Prior 2000:37).

These principles are meant as a short-hand for the knowledge stored in Manas, ‘*an encyclopaedic collection of all the Kirghiz mythological tales and traditions. ... It is a species of Iliad of the Steppe*’ (Valikhanov 2007 [1865]: 103). Certainly Manas is part of the current social fabric in the calling of *manaschis*, and in the patronage by the state through monuments, TV and school. However, I did not hear people make practical use of the ‘seven principles’ or the epic as a source of wisdom, legitimation or as an everyday tool in bringing up children.¹³¹ In a region in which *manaschis* are scarce, I found everyday references to Manas rather limited to the name of a person or shop and occasional features of the landscape recording his presence.

Epics seem at once timeless, as if they happened only yesterday; on the other hand they appear ‘walled off’ from the present. Epics belong both to a ‘long ago’ golden time and to ‘eternity’: along both these axes, their meaning endures (Bakhtin 1994: 182). The role of blood and *sanjira* on the other hand show ‘*a deep concern with the way in which the present and future grow out of the past, along chains of historical connectedness*’ (Bunn 2000: 130).

We have seen that kinship through descent is considered an important dimension and foundation for social interactions, whether in the *uruu*, the lessons of the heroic ancestor Manas or seeking fictive kinship through ‘blood’. But what about the place of individuals in accounts of the past and their influence on the present? How do people narrate their own biographies, and those of others? Who makes history? As we have seen, Manas was and is a

¹³¹ Proverbs are a much more common tool.

mover and shaker, someone who changes the face of history. What of figures in the present and near past: if they are not sung about in new epics, how are they commemorated?

Bektash *Bii* is remembered very fondly by quite a few people (especially people ‘responsible’ for history like Kadyrbek) for protecting the Korosh and their prosperity. There are many stories about his intelligence and humane justice. Although the oldest people in Bel Aldy remember seeing him as children, the following story could have taken place pretty much anytime in Kyrgyz history. Like the Manas epic, this tale does not have any markers to distinguish when it took place. I heard it from an electrician, whiling away the time waiting for a shared taxi.

‘Once there was a tournament between a jigit [young man] from Ketmen Töbö and a jigit belonging to Karasakal, the bii of Talas. The lad from Ketmen Töbö was called Namys. He had excellent armour, but the jigit from Talas asked around to find out where his weak spot was. He discovered it was his neck. When they fought, Namys turned out to be really good; no-one had been able to measure up to the Talas hero before. But he was killed by the Talas hero who went for his throat, putting his weapon right through him. Outright killing was actually forbidden at tournaments. But the Ketmen Töbö people were too afraid of Karasakal to ask for kun [blood money]. So the notables of the area consulted and nominated Bektash Bii to go and ask for it in Talas. Bektash Bii arrived at Karasakal's boz üi, went in and sat down at the seat of honour. Later his wife asked him worriedly why he hadn't been afraid to go in: he said his koldochusuu [protector spirits] were two snow leopards, and that they were stronger than the wolf protector spirit of Karasakal. So Bektash Bii got forty of each kind of livestock as blood money: forty camels, forty horses, forty yaks and so on.’

The enemies of Bektash *Bii* are also well remembered. These prominent leaders are remembered partly thanks to the praise or taunts that a bard (*akyn*) like Toktogul Satylganov recorded. This is how Sultanaly Ata described Bektash *Bii*'s opponent:

‘Dyikanbai was a great man in Toktogul raion. He knew what to do in Ketmen Töbö, he did whatever he wanted, he lived like a king. He had a relative, who was his rival. They envied each other and became enemies. And then Toktogul sang:

*You defeated Boronbai’s yellow son
And now he does not have a permanent place.
You fine and eat the whole people
Your nails are poisonous like eagles
How can you continue your line. ...*

‘Toktogul cursed him, so no good person would come out of his line. Dyikanbai’s relatives were against Russia, they did not obey Russia, fought with them and only joined [them] later. And then Dyikanbai took soldiers from Russia to fight with the Basmachi.’¹³²

In Bel Aldy, Dyikanbai is remembered as a tyrant, who had a special cliff for throwing people down, and whose campsite lay on one of the hills yonder. A distant descendant of Dyikanbai in another village had quite different things to say about him:

‘He never spared anything. He respected his parents. His mother Saikal was my close relative. Saikal was from Jungal. And Saikal did not spare anything. She put everything on the table. She would say that even if a person walks naked, they should not stint at table: only then would God give plenty. ... A person should be generous as a host; a person should put everything on the table even for his enemy.’

Note that Dyikanbai’s descendant speaks more about his direct ancestor, Dyikanbai’s mother, than Dyikanbai himself. As mentioned earlier, it is neither good manners nor quite safe to speak ill of the dead - especially those close to you. So his descendent did not say

¹³²Here Sultanaly is alluding to the complex alliances forged with and against tsarist colonial rule. The *Basmachi* were variously aligned and motivated opponents to late tsarist and early Bolshevik rule, particularly around the Ferghana valley. *Basmachi* is still a derogatory term, something like ‘brigand’.

anything about other aspects of Dyikanbai's rule, he refrained to comment on his justice or other leadership qualities. Toktogul Satylganov (1864-1933) has a special place in the national pantheon as the 'democrat bard', the singer who suffered exile to Siberia for his denunciation of cruel *bais*. We have already encountered the grave of Toktogul, situated next to a *mazar* and museum in his memory. The whole region is strongly associated with him: the district town, several schools, avenues and the region itself are all named in his honour. He also has statues in Bishkek and figures on Kyrgyz banknotes. A paraphrase often used to describe what he did is: '*he told the truth, defended the poor and defied the rich*'. As the museum displays about him explain, Toktogul welcomed the Soviet Union and composed epic poems such as '*What a woman gave birth to such a son as Lenin*'. After the Revolution he lived in a modest house, no longer persecuted and hiding in *boz üi*. His grandchildren still live nearby.¹³³ The figures from the pre-Soviet and early Soviet period remembered here are each *baatyrs* or enemies of *baatyrs* in the mould of Manas: strong and fair leaders, outstanding individuals.

So far, I have traced how strong leaders feature in the landscape and in stories in ways that ordinary people do not. I see an interweaving here of pre-Soviet Central Asian forms of politics and commemoration and Soviet era personality and hero worker cults. This focus on personalities is of course ironic in the context of Marxism-Leninism, where 'the people' were cast as the moving force of history. I found very few traces of this kind of thinking in people's accounts. What, in the above accounts, causes history is *leadership*, when Bektash *Bii* secures the *uruu*'s blood money, when Toktogul promotes Communism.¹³⁴ However, these are forms of history that everyone who can find a genealogical link to these great men, has a stake in.

As Ruslan recommends, certain kinds of pasts such as the 'seven fathers' are supposed to be actively commemorated, while others that threaten the claim to unity based on the genealogy of the *uruu*, are best (publicly) ignored. The rites of the dead, the emphasis on descent and commonality through 'blood' and definition of statehood through a people ('*el*') and celebration of heroes feature prominently in public life.¹³⁵ I have detailed two registers of

¹³³ For more on akyns see chapter 8.

¹³⁴ Humphrey also points out that the Buryat idea of hero ancestor, a leader who integrates the whole is similar to Soviet ideology. In the 1990s a celebrated Buryat athlete was also a successful farm manager. The farm did well because of his personal connections (Humphrey 1998: 500).

¹³⁵ All these activities contrast markedly with Spanish Gitano practices: 'Talking about the past, they explain, means bringing the beloved deceased to mind and painfully re-experiencing the tie of love that unites relatives.'

talking about the past: the genealogical and the epic, both of which can be combined in a heroic story about the Korosh ancestor Bektash *Bii* or local bard Toktogul, for example. Do people speak of current events and leaders in the same register? Do they talk about their life experience as potentially heroic, continuing in a line of ancestors, or does autobiography require another register?

How to tell your Life

I became increasingly fascinated by the way people talked about their personal past, and that of the places around them. At the time, I was struck by what I thought of as a lack: a lack of story-telling, a lack of events, a bland form of recounting the past in which pain was only referred to anecdotally. I thought people held back from telling me their private stories. But looking back over the way people chose to share their lives with me, I am now less struck by absences than by how indistinctly I *heard* their accounts, because they did not fit what I thought of as ‘biography’ or ‘storied places’. As Connerton has pointed out, the idea of biographies stems from the memoirs told or written by people who played an acknowledged role in making history (Connerton 1989:19). Unlike in Britain, where the biographies of even very modest people now occupy a large section of every bookshop, it seems true that biographies in Kyrgyzstan are the preserve of those, such as Manas, who have distinguished themselves with great deeds.¹³⁶ I was also struck by how differently men and women seemed to tell their lives, realizing later that this was more a division according to ‘public’ and ‘private’ lives, that happened to follow familiar gender lines. This is how Anarbek, a former livestock technician, NGO activist and the person who first introduced me to Bel Aldy, tells his life:

‘I was lucky that in 1990 I was only 35. I regret that I didn’t get more education, despite the Soviet Union. I need more information, [it’s like] air. I’m jealous of my children who have these opportunities now. ... I was just a cog in the Soviet plan, implementing things. I was like a spare part. ... I studied

...’Because the beloved dead are unmentionable, there are no heroes or figureheads (Gay y Blasco 2001: 636 and 640). As is evident from the strength of commemoration rites for the dead and the prominence of heroes, this is not at all the case in Toktogul.

¹³⁶ Though many workers’ autobiographies were published, as a field of research in its own right, oral history did not exist in the Soviet Union (Aitpaeva, personal communication).

biology for six and a half years, got an MBA in Moscow. I did the academic side, but was then told I should get some practical experience. So I left the prestigious sphere, and now I'm in between. I got involved in production. ... I was promised that after a year or two in Chatkal [remote area of Kyrgyzstan] as the head livestock technician, I would be sent to Ethiopia and deal with the tractor export there.'

This account by Anarbek, someone who is rather critical of the Soviet era, is nevertheless in its form and tone similar to self-portraits of much older men and former Party activists. Strikingly, this kind of account focused almost exclusively on education and work: on occasion this mode felt like a kind of 'accounting for oneself', but also reeling off what was publicly valuable and relevant to tell a 'scientist'. Education was after all something I apparently valued too, and a new opportunity for most Central Asians in the second half of the twentieth century. As I will elucidate further in chapter 7, work was the way Soviet citizens gained legitimacy, what gave value to their lives. Socialist work performance is certainly a safe and honourable aspect of the self to talk about, and in this generation, always connected to the state.

It was also noticeable that people never began, as a European autobiographer is likely to, by describing their parents, their background and childhood. Recounting biographies was kept quite separate from talking about *sanjira*. In men's accounts, marriage and children were also noticeably an afterthought, not part of the 'official' biography (like a CV). Certainly this format is recognizable from author's biographic statements in the preface to books or museum displays. As Kamp notes on oral history in Uzbekistan: '*In Soviet autobiography, grievances within one's family could be expressed as complaint against oppressors, but interpersonal relations were not the stuff of public discourse*' (Kamp 2001: 24).

The vast majority of distinguished people listed in this local encyclopaedia, as in the Encyclopaedia of Kyrgyzstan, are male. Women are mostly mentioned when they take on public roles associated with men, such as the hero Saikal beating Manas in a wrestling match, or Kurmanjan Datka, *Queen of the Alai*, politicking with the Russians in southern Kyrgyzstan. But great women can also act as women, wise wives or nurturing mothers in association with their heroic husbands and sons. As we have seen Dyikanbai's mother is remembered, at least among some of her descendants, for being a good hostess.

I was struck by how little agency such an authoritative man as Anarbek revealed in his account: whatever authority he had, he underplayed or represented as an extension of the Communist party and state. He represented himself as a professional who went where he was sent, but who also had hopes and ambitions of his own. These kinds of accounts imply an anonymous, institutional ‘director’ of the stages of a person’s career. Kamp also notes such an anonymous ‘they’ and the absence of individuals’ in a prominent Uzbek woman’s autobiography. Kamp speculates whether the experience of repeated Party purges had made people like her cautious to mention individuals. But there might also be an ideological point here, putting the ‘we’ before individuals (or as Anarbek puts it, feeling like a ‘*cog in a machine*’) and portraying the Party as the historical actor (Kamp 2001: 31).¹³⁷

Anarbek says ‘*I was promised that after a year or two in Chatkal as the head livestock technician, I would be sent to Ethiopia.*’ Not incidentally, the anonymous entity directing his career also regulates his moves around the Soviet Union and Kyrgyz Republic. I found it very noticeable how much such moves featured in men’s accounts, and not only in those of functionaries and specialists.¹³⁸ In chapter 3 I detailed how the Soviet state used settlement and resettlement policies quite ruthlessly and successfully to establish a new ideology, social order and *Homo Sovieticus*. Men like Anarbek configured their authority partly from their mobility, as cosmopolitan people connected to places such as Moscow.¹³⁹ Do women then also derive authority from their mobilities? I will discuss this question in relation to Nargiza, one of my adopted relatives, now like myself in her early thirties.

‘My parents weren’t well off when I was little, they had a lot of children. I was one of the youngest, so I didn’t do any work at home, in Toktogul town. I just played and went to school. We played a lot in the park, and went on the carousels. There used to be a summer club in the park and a disco for the young folk. I only went a few times, to watch Indian films on a sheet. I was a

¹³⁷ To the teacher in the water-starved village, these people are the anonymous ‘they’ that also direct Anarbek’s Soviet career. To Liudmilla Fedorovna, ‘they’ might also be the heroic people, workers of the Soviet Union.

¹³⁸ Perhaps it is also relevant that the drivers and tractorists, mobile and with access to mechanized transport, had much better pay than other labourers on collective farms. Also, most men who came of age in the Soviet period served a two-year army service in other Soviet republics, and had tales to tell. This ‘armed travel’ would have been a formative period in becoming a man (cf. Nurakun’s account in chapter 6)

¹³⁹ Tsing describes Meratus men in Indonesia also deriving crucial authority from travelling and interacting with officials, while women travelling are considered sexually immodest, but also brave (Tsing 1993: 127 and 227).

good student and dreamed of being a technician in a factory, checking quality and things. But my parents couldn't afford it, and anyway I didn't get into the good school. And then I got abducted away from school ... [to Bel Aldy]

When I first came to the village, I didn't know about farm work, didn't know how to use a hoe or how to make hay. I didn't know about livestock, or how to make felt carpets and cushions. But then I learnt to do all this.

*After my first boy, I didn't give birth for seven years. I went to lots of doctors and *bübüüler* [healers]. Finally an old *bübüü* from Kazakhstan told me I'd had the evil eye put on me. When I first came and started to work, cutting hay and all, people saw me and said 'look, she's come from Toktogul, and now she's working well and everything'. So then I couldn't give birth. But the *bübü* gave me tampons from herbs she prepared, and then I had another boy. And now I even have a little girl, after waiting for so many years.'¹⁴⁰*

I realised when reviewing my fieldwork notes, that I found such an account much more satisfying, and less 'empty' than the one by Anarbek. This is because I expected biographies to be intimate, to be emotionally charged and to speak of events. I also expected them to speak of family relations, marriage, children, losses and propitious turns of event. As women seemed to call their dead men folk to mind more frequently than men in conversation with me, marriage was a much more significant event in their lives: their household, personal relations were reconstituted upon marriage much more radically than those of their husbands. For both young men and women however, marriage confers greater authority (for the woman, bearing a male child is an added step). Japarov refers to very distinct phases in customary life-stages of Kyrgyz: childhood, youth, adulthood and old age (Japarov 2005:123). I would add marriage to this scheme, and since their advent, education, army service and employment. These are all life-stages that people like Anarbek and Nargiza distinguish in their tale. However, these socially recognized phases are not necessarily the turning points of greatest relevance to each person. Yes, it was important for Nargiza to have a boy in the first place, but she yearned for a little girl. If at first, family looks to be the pre-eminent theme in Nargiza's account, her dream of becoming a factory technician and the success as well as danger that learning other kinds of work brought her, are also central to her narrative, and bound up with her connections to other people.

¹⁴⁰ I will visit Nargiza's parents for a party in chapter 8.

In women's lives, one factor that might account for movement not featuring as the source of authority, is that they do not always decide when and who to marry, the location of their adult lives. When discussing marriage people quite often ask '*where did she marry to?*' rather than '*who did she marry?*' As in Nargiza's case, young women may be abducted. The practice of *ala kachuu* (literally 'take and run', bride abduction) is the aspect of Central Asia that newcomers to the area find most shocking. Women often describe this situation with a proverb: '*God writes your fortune on your forehead*' (*mangdaiyna jazganyn köriüi*). You do not determine your own fate and it is not supposed to be reversible.¹⁴¹

Like many other women, Nargiza remembers her time as a girl as carefree, before the shock of leaving her family, having to learn to live in a village, and dealing with the social pressure to bear children. I rarely heard men waxing lyrical about their childhoods. Even if they had left their birthplace, they did not leave the familial constellations of their childhood behind. The following is the dream of a *jailoo* that Alimkhan Apa, aged ninety, tells of her childhood:

Fat butter, cream...we would milk a cow and my mother would prepare eight sheep stomachs of butter [for the winter]. ... There were thirteen people in the family and each of us had their own horses. My saddle was made of silver and embroideries: a silver saddle is so heavy!

Once I and the daughter of another leader ... went together to Suusamir. My brother said that the horse I was riding was really tired because he had visited four collective farms on that horse and he warned that the horse might not travel well: I should change it on my way if I could. On the way I met my father coming down with kymyz, yoghurt and meat. We sat down and drank kymyz. My father had talkan [ground toasted maize] and buckwheat with him, which my mother had prepared for me. But we did not eat it, we told father to take it to the kids at home. I changed my horse and we went past Boor-Teke high pasture. There were lots of people and most of them brought us talkan in big bowls. ... But we didn't eat, although they tried to persuade us, saying that

¹⁴¹ The verb for a woman getting married is '*turmushka chiguu*', i.e. to leave for your destiny/fate, while for a man it is '*üilönüü*'. A lot of people think it shameful, even impossible to 'go back across the in-laws doorstep' (*bosogonu attagan bolboit*) i.e. to refuse the marriage or get divorced later, although in practice this is quite common.

we might be hungry later. We left them and met Kazakhs on our way in Suusamir. We galloped so fast, as if they were chasing us. They wondered at us, saying that Kyrgyz girls ride horses so well. We passed three boz üi, but we rode by as if those families were going to eat us! Then we came to a river called Jaman-Echki [bad goat]. We got off the horses and waded across, our horses swam. When we reached home my mother was frying bread. She felt uneasy, she was feeling something bad, and was making bread to pass her bad feelings to the bread. When I called her she got a fright. She asked whether I had really come and started running around the boz üi, thanking God that I had come home in safety. In the morning she slaughtered a baby goat and did a ritual on me with its lungs. My poor mother, she was frightened and worried about me. She was so happy that I arrived safely.'

Alimkhan Apa's story evokes all the excitement she felt at travelling alone as a young girl, which would not have been a frequent occurrence. Negotiating the dangers of strangers and mountain rivers, she remembers this adventure, takes pride in her skilled horsemanship, courage and depriving herself of good food for the sake of younger family members. She dwells lovingly on the abundant pastoral food products, which contrast piteously with the course bread and tea she has to offer guests now.¹⁴² During the Soviet era - that is for most of her life - it would have been rather incautious to recall silver saddles: she would have risked being looked on as a suspect Socialist, if not *kulak*. Even the high valley Suusamir that she mentions was known in her youth as a stronghold of *bais* and *manaps* (Galitskii et.al. 1976: 9).

Nargiza and Anarbek told their life in a way that connected them to others (states, families), making themselves stand out only in relation to a collective effort. I saw little difference between age-cohorts or generations in doing so. Even Alimkhan Apa showed what a considerate and accomplished girl she was. At other moments she spoke of the hard labour she had contributed to the war effort in logging trees, mining and road building.¹⁴³ Gathering together the emphasis on belonging to a kin group through descent on the one hand, adventurous heroes like Manas, political leaders like Bektash *Bii*, Dyikanbai Khan and his mother, celebrated public figures like Toktogul Satylganov: what elements of these accounts

¹⁴² I will return to Alimkhan's family in chapter 6

¹⁴³ See chapter 7 for a discussion of the idea of 'serving the people'

do Anarbek, Nargiza or Alimkhan Apa use in recounting the vagaries of their fortunes? Each of their accounts is quite different, and my relationship with each of these narrators was different: I was much more intimately acquainted with Anarbek and Nargiza than Alimkhan Apa. And yet more trust did not necessarily translate into a telling that bridged ‘history’ and intimate biography. Judging from other conversations, the two did not easily mix. Like Nargiza, Alimkhan Apa dwelt on her girlhood as a time when the world was alright – a form of yearning I will return to as an artistic genre in chapter 8.

Anarbek sees ‘*the water (blood) running in its channels*’ in his own life, taking up the task of Bektash *Bii* in seeking to lead and protect his people again – in his case aspiring to parliament. Nargiza can be described as heroic in her resolve, intelligence and strength in mastering an alien village environment. Anarbek and Nargiza speak of themselves as survivors in a way, people who made something with the lot they were handed. But none of them portray themselves as being fully in the ‘driving seat’ of their lives. Nargiza is unlikely to feature in the next ‘Ketmen Töbö Encyclopaedia’. Nor is Alimkhan Apa likely to, even though one of the most exciting and joyous moments she remembers of her girlhood is when she acted rather like a *jigit*. Anarbek however is likely to be mentioned in future histories of Toktogul. However, he will not stand out because of his descent from a great *bii*, but for his own public role.

Toktogul Satylganov’s achievements are in fact the greater (and in the Soviet era ideologically sound) because of his poor background. Rather than as epic, it is also possible to read heroism as a strong Soviet trope.¹⁴⁴ Alimkhan Apa’s other stories of breaking stones and saving colleagues from the wrath of their boss have as much to do with Stakhanovite heroes as epics. I will return to the relationship between ‘history’, autobiography, and agency in chapter 6. For now, I would like to return to the relationship between commemorating the past, and certain places. Alimkhan Apa’s reminiscence of the Suusamir *jailoo* is a particularly striking example of this. In Ruslan’s account of *sanjira* or the story of Bektash *Bii* and Dyikanbai Khan, places appear primarily as *territories*. In Nargiza’s and Anarbek’s story also, moving between places is a corner-stone of their experience. As in my own life, the place could become shorthand for indexing a way of life, or a learning experience.

In Nargiza’s account, the local district centre and the remote village signify two very different ways of life; indeed her success in overcoming this difference becomes a source of

¹⁴⁴ Kharkhordin sees links between Soviet hero cults and Orthodox Christian practices in Russia. One way of working on yourself was to choose and imitate a hero (1999: 358).

danger. The envy that she believes her success in adapting to village life provoked, shows that this step is considered quite difficult for young women. Along with many other people, Nargiza feels a gap between even the small district centre of some 20.000 people, and a large village of several thousand one hour's drive away. This is a graded gap, with the capital Bishkek and great cities abroad being further steps away. Like many people of her generation, Nargiza also contrasts her Soviet-framed youth with an adult life that lacks any markers of the state, and where her hopes are quite differently orientated. This also has to do with her move from the district centre, a new, planned town to a fairly remote village (equally planned, although it *looks* less modern). As I will show below in discussing the conceit of 'becoming cultured', this contraction, overlap or collapsing of 'different times and places' is very common.¹⁴⁵ In such a situation, Massey's dictum that the 'local' is also a product of contacts and links with other places, rings very true (Massey 1995: 183). I will return to how the story of 'becoming cultured' through places plays in new kinds of biographies, those of migrant workers, in chapter 6.

Places as Territory and Resource

I have shown how shifting life between different places - Moscow, the district centre, exile in Siberia, contests and wealth in the Suusamir valley, founding a new *uruu* in Bel Aldy - loom memorably and significantly in the lives of all the people encountered here. Even Manas is famed for his campaigns all the way to Beijing, and bringing the Kyrgyz from the Altai to the Ala-Too mountains. The currency of relationships to and between certain places also relates to entitlements that are made on the basis of historical associations. Like sanjira, these commemorations also result in claims as historical rights over things and people.

Ruslan, the genealogist, says each *uruu* had their own land '*like the territories of wild animals, so you couldn't just move there*'. The link between legitimate descent and the right to live on *uruu* territories thus becomes obvious, as is the possibility of being 'chased away' if one is not part of the local *bii*'s family. In the early 20th century, Tülküü was a very rich man with a thousand sheep, forty camels and many horses. When Tülküü's great-grandson Anarbek rides past the family's old campsite, he points it out to his son: '*that's our land over there*'. He feels it is his duty to make sure this is not forgotten. Although the good land is now owned by a rich shop-keeper, Tülküü's family however do not pursue their claim to it.

¹⁴⁵ I will return to the relationship between country and city in the section on 'becoming cultured'.

Meanwhile the highly desirable pastures of Suusamir, which Alimkhan Apa thinks of with such fondness, is now perhaps even richer because the main road between North and South runs eighty kilometres along its flanks. It is a great place to sell *kymyz* and other products at high prices to travellers. Before state boundaries grew in significance, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz from different regions would congregate here in the high summer. Now only one or two herders from Bel Aldy make the long riding trip to remote corners of Suusamir, far from the road. Other families sometimes discuss migrating there by truck along the main road, but are worried about their right to be there being challenged by more recent users. As discussed in chapter 2, rights to pasture use depend more on use than on absolute historical precedent. Unlike Ruslan's view of the intimate match between *uruu* and territory, in each of the cases mentioned, *uruu* affiliation is not enough to guarantee access to land, though it may facilitate it.

Boundaries drawn and redrawn along state administrative lines, rather than according to *uruu* also continue to play a role in land disputes. Considering the enormous amount of control that state institutions had over the use of land in the Soviet era, and the responsibility for fulfilling economic plans that they carried, it is not surprising that power struggles took place over administrative borders. One village that was particularly subject to these disputes is the remotest of all: Sary Kamysh (Yellow Reed). Local journalist Almaz explained its history to me thus: '*When people were being drafted for the war, Sary Kamysh was part of the Jumgal district. Since they were new, strangers to the district administration, Jumgal decided to enlist soldiers mostly from this village.*' People felt wronged, and their leaders lobbied for separating from Jumgal after the war. So from 1956 it was incorporated into Alamidin rayon and the collective farms there, which were near Bishkek. This was an astonishing piece of map-based boundary-making: there are several large mountain ranges between Bishkek and Sary Kamysh, so travelling within this *kolkhoz* unit would have required a round-trip through the north of Kyrgyzstan.

Nowadays Sary Kamysh is part of Toktogul *raion*, although it is 120 kilometres from the district centre, and the road is impassable in winter.¹⁴⁶ This affiliation is a result of a drought in the 1970s, when Sary Kamysh was reassigned to Osh region in order to assure a better distribution of hay. Such resources were hotly contested between regional administrators, under pressure to fulfil plans. But it is also striking that the awareness of having Jumgal victimize (as the villagers saw it) this particular village for the war draft, still

¹⁴⁶ In other areas such as Siberia this would be quite normal. In Kyrgyzstan, it is not.

plays a role in choosing how to administer Sary Kamysh, this marginal place somewhere between South, North and central Kyrgyzstan. These struggles are in some ways reminiscent of the encroachment of rival *uruus* and *biis* on each other's territory in pre-Soviet times. A remarkable degree of fission and fusion of boundaries seems to have gone on, despite sedentarization. Like *uruu* territories, administrative boundaries were and are important because they are power boundaries, the frame of structures and hierarchies.

Memorious landscape?

In the discussion so far, places have featured as territories (stately, *uruu*, or campsites established through use rights). Moving between places also appears to augment or diminish people's status, as in the case of Anarbek and Nargiza. How else might the story of people's lives, as individuals or collectivities, intersect with that of places? How do people recognize or perform the passing and freezing of time in the Toktogul valley? In what sense do '*stories make, organize and link places*' (De Certeau and Giard 1998: 115)?

Even if there are few *manaschis* in Toktogul, Manas and other heroes have left their marks on the landscape, the hoof prints of their horses, the stones they threw, the graves they lie in. As most people know, there was once a giant named Saigan who set to work digging the valley of *Ketmen Töbö* with a hoe (a *ketmen*). He threw up the earth into a huge mound that now juts into the valley. He broke his hoe and threw the three parts of it away at Three Poplars (*Üch Terek*), where two of the large trees that sprung up in consequence can still be seen. Saigan was so huge that when he was killed in Uzbekistan, they used his bones as a bridge.

A writer in a village now called *Özgörüsh* (Change) told me animatedly how he had watched some Russian archaeologists excavating graves, and sketched for me a circular chamber, with graves going off the sides.¹⁴⁷ With wide-open eyes and circling hands he impressed on me an ancient town where people forged iron nearby:

'The sources of this iron have been forgotten, but you can still find beautifully coloured ceramics there: we don't know how old they are or anything. There's a legend that one day a man came to town, but no-one would give him a bed, so

¹⁴⁷ These are likely the Scythian graves excavated in 1973-4 and described by Ploskikh (1977).

he slept somewhere miserable. The next day he left, and soon after stones fell from the sky and destroyed the town.'

Although many intricate legends have been recorded in books, the stories I heard where usually of the kind recounted above: glimpses of great events or figures in the past, short commentaries on why a place might be holy now or part of Toktogul district. Some of these marks in the landscape are made by outstanding persons. Others are created by people in the plural noun, such as ordinary graves, traces of *boz üü*, house sites - and dams. Some are very modest markers of ancestors having been there: in the soft hills above our village lies 'Juma's Stone'. Grandfather Azimkul says if he were still strong, he would go and stand it upright again: we should all go, slaughter and eat a sheep there to commemorate Juma Ata (note that this is *not* a *mazar*). Beyond commemorating personal ancestors, not everybody is interested in these stories about their environment, not everyone can relate the story of Bektash *Bii* securing blood money for the Korosh, and most people were not eager to make sure a visiting anthropologist knew these stories as essential knowledge. The conceit of blood and genealogy enables people to mobilize affiliations. These affiliations are one source of rights among others for entitlements to land.

Apart from these entitlements, in what sense are landscape elements 'mnemonic pegs'? People like Alimkhan Apa or Nargiza know of the odd 'thousand mounds' (*ming döböö* - likely old cemeteries) and pottery shards that turn up under the plough. Yet one cannot say that people habitually read the landscape with an archaeologist's eye as 'solidified' event or time, as Ingold or Schama do. The fact that *jailoos* like Suusamir still exist mean they *can* function as a material, physical mnemonic peg. Teaching your children about land that used to be occupied by a forebear maintains emotional investment and potential for entitlements. Or if you walk past a memorial to a person, it is beneficial for you to spare a thought for the dead. Stable landscape features encourage commemoration. What has disappeared under the dam cannot, except through photos and stories, which are in fact almost entirely absent. Nevertheless, in chapter 3 we saw how the submerged land beneath the dam reservoir is cause for bitterness for a teacher in a new village that struggles to get a water supply, and a cause for writing celebratory poetry for someone like Liudmilla Fedorovna. To both, the Toktogul reservoir is a mnemonic peg signalling rupture rather than continuity. The dam and reservoir stand out as the landscape features most obviously *created* by humans. The Suusamir *jailoo* Alimkhan Apa holds so dear, the poplars growing where the

giant Saigan threw his hoe, or even ‘Juma’s Stone’ that Azimkul feels responsible for, are not places *made* by people in the same way: though people have left their mark, it is not a mark celebrating the submission of nature, as in the case of the Toktogul dam.

So apart from the association of places and events, how and why does commemoration happen? When the *arbak* demand of a *manaschi* to tell their story, when Azimkul visits his forebears’ stone, or when Alimkhan Apa emphasizes the wealth and joy of her youth, these are all instances when past events and people are made precious and when people show concern for commemorating, rather than effacing them. Some kinds of histories were more essential than others: while everyone ought to know their ‘seven fathers’ and about Manas or Toktogul Satylganov, people were not particularly careful to make sure their children, or an ethnographer, knew the stories about Bektash *Bii*. There are also contexts when a shameful ancestry, or at least a fragile one that disrupts *birimdik* (unity) is best forgotten, or when Anarbek decides, for the sake of collective peace, not to claim ancestral land. As I will argue below, the avoidance of specifying the agents of history may also be a strategy to create or maintain *birimdik*. As for the link between personal life-histories and grand narratives, I showed a disjuncture between the modes of genealogy, heroes and autobiographies. I showed up gender differences in telling life-stories, noting that some men derived their Soviet era authority partly from their mobility and association with prestigious places, while mobility through marriage was not always a boon to the status of a woman.

In accounts of ancient iron-producing cities, of ‘grandmother springs’, of genealogies traceable to the times of Genghis Khan, in state celebrations of 1000 years of Manas, there is a sense of the Kyrgyz as an ancient people, an awareness that they and others have lived in this land for a very long time. A sense of historical depth and continuity could suggest nothing but pride and satisfaction. But what also emerges in people’s sense of place and accounts of their lives, is a sense of the rise and decline of civilizations, of a mutability that can be painful. ‘*Now we are not even able to build a cowshed here*’, as one man commented, mulling over the greatness of the ancient world, and more recently the Soviet Union. It is to the most recent past that I now turn. How does this sense of rise and fall of civilizations, of heroes, genealogies, blood and personhood sit with people’s views of their Soviet past?

Chapter 6: Commemorating Change between Collectivization and Privatization

Born in 1935 and a horse herder since the age of ten, Koichubek Ata is a highly respected *aksakal*, a man who received many Soviet medals honouring his labour. His children have done well since independence: they have a taxi, horse herd and a daughter in a well-paid administrative post. A bit of a tease, Koichubek Ata carries his authority lightly and leaves much of the day-to-day decision making to his vociferous wife. One of the things he likes to do best is to ride out to the hamlet he was born in, where his son has been looking after the family's livestock since independence. This is what he had to say about life in the Soviet Union and after:

'At night we would build a fire and sleep on cement. ... On the snow, it was cold. Now it's easy. At that time, if you lost even one horse, all your labour earnings would be taken away. ... Yes, that's how it was then. As for now, even if you kill a person, no one cares. Back then, if you lost a horse you would be questioned. They would ask: "What did you do? How did it happen?" Those times were difficult. Now it is easy.

... 'Those [Soviet] times were good. We had flour, we were given flour, sugar was cheap, everything was cheap! Now it's all expensive. It's not good. ... There's no work. Now children eye your pension and ask for money.'

At first all I heard in Koichubek Ata's account was nostalgia, regret for the passing of the Soviet Union. It is likely that I heard nostalgia so dominantly, because it fit with a concern with nostalgia evident in many popular and scholarly accounts of post-Soviet change (Boym 2001, Boyer 2006, Kaneff 2004, Oushakine 2000, Yurchak 2006). Surveys have documented that Central Asian citizens, in particular Kyrgyz citizens, generally view Soviet history as positive, other ex-Soviet citizens having a generally more mixed or negative view (Eurasian Monitor 2009). This correlates with how unhappy or satisfied citizens are with their current government: the most unhappy (and/or unafraid to say so) are the Kyrgyz (McMann 2005:10). In the post-socialist world, despite common knowledge of atrocities, there has been no 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' (Boym 2001: 58). Unlike the Baltic states or Ukraine, where Soviet-era injustices have become a rallying point for the nation

(problematically so, when these become attached to Russianness), in Kyrgyzstan the death toll of collectivization or Stalinist purges have not become a political legitimation of independence, apology or redress. Indeed, there is no obvious heir to the Soviet regime that might be blamed.

In the following, I critique how social scientists have reported on post-Soviet Central Asia as a region of ‘ruins’ and the comparative, and thus judgmental, frame they share with informants like Koichubek when talking of the Soviet era. In what way is the Soviet era relevant to different actors, and how does it relate to other kinds of pasts? Does the Soviet past have a role as a ‘social charter’ or only as threatening and irrelevant suffering (Appadurai 1981)? I will demonstrate that there are different ways of evaluating the Soviet era, and joined to these evaluations, different locations of value and recognition. I continue to hold in view how individuals relate to the grand sweep of history on the one hand, and how certain places are timed on the other.

I will discuss nostalgia, but also distinguish other registers of talking about the past that are evident in Koichubek Ata’s comments. I show how a comparative mode of telling the past encourages a view of history as a series of traditions and revolutions, for example in the case of collectivization and privatization, two moments that were regularly picked out as significant and troubling in Bel Aldy. These comparative registers interlink with stately grand narratives and how people debate who, when or what is properly *kul’turnii*: cultured or civilized. I further ask what kind of experiences are not spoken about, have no place in these registers, and whether certain silences and gaps can be described as post-colonial. Where do these different senses of temporality harmonize, concatenate or become disjointed? I conclude by reflecting on the visions of the future all these narratives implicitly project or react to.

Let me first return to Koichubek Ata’s assessment of collective farm life. Koichubek focuses on the conditions of life ‘*at that time*’ and ‘*now*’, on the actions of authorities (‘*they*’, i.e. collective farm management in the case of lost horses, the police in case of murder) and the strictness of rules. He sees the former rule as difficult, a harsh life, but also as an achievement. This cannot be described as nostalgia in the sense of wanting the Soviet Union wholesale back the way it was. Although Koichubek Ata shied away from criticizing current power holders outright at other points in the conversation, his comments on murders being ignored are clearly highly critical: ‘*now no one cares*’! Evidently for Koichubek much has changed, there is an enormous gulf between his Soviet and post-Soviet experience. His

account, strongly evaluative as it is, is also ambivalent.

Listening to Koichubek Ata's emotional and emphatic account of horse herding in the Soviet era, I felt him willing me to understand what his life had been like back then. In assuming a big gulf between what I knew and could comprehend or assume, and what he had experienced, Koichubek Ata was likely responding to Cold War portrayals of life 'on the other side', and perhaps seeking to correct any lies I might have been told (cf. Verdery 1996: 8, Dudwick 2000:3). I think these assumptions about me often coloured portraits of Soviet life in a more rosy light than they might for another listener. On the other hand, we both shared a common pre-occupation with assessing the recent past, thinking comparatively about living conditions. Some people differentiated less than Koichubek Ata in portraying the Soviet past as better than 'now'. And there were those, like Koichubek's contemporary Nurakun Ata, who were relieved at its demise:

'I was left an orphan when my father died when I was 5 years old. Then began a very difficult period. Now people say that we are in a time when there is nothing. I do not agree: now we have everything! Back then there was nothing. We were not allowed to plant the fields. The kolkhoz took all our livestock. So I grew up as an orphan.'

Nurakun Ata is here clearly referring to the early years of collectivization, the years of famine.¹⁴⁸ Though Koichubek Ata does not specify *when* during the Soviet period he is talking about as cheap, safe, strict and so on, he is clearly not thinking of the famine, which he equally experienced. Both take different Soviet periods as point of comparison and as defining moments of their lives and experience of Sovietness. Nevertheless, what these two accounts have in common is the strong emphasis on *comparing* the present with the Soviet era. The tendency of humans to bemoan the passing of the good old days, to treat past and present as solid black and white objects is certainly not restricted to the post-Soviet region.

However, Koichubek Ata and Nurakun Ata's stress on a Soviet 'then' and post-Soviet 'now' is an interest also shared by a wide swathe of scholars. Scholarship on the post-Soviet era has focused strongly on the legacy of the Soviet past, on revising the history of the Soviet

¹⁴⁸ There were in fact several famines in Kyrgyzstan in the 1910s and 1920s too, but these are often now beyond personal recall. Nurakun is likely referring to the great hunger in 1931-33 and during the war. These famines were not mentioned in Soviet era history books (Ercilasun 2009: 66 and 72).

Union itself, assessing how it developed, operated and why and how it ceased to be.¹⁴⁹ One can see this as a continuation of the Sovietology project, of studying and combatting the Soviet Union as the other (viable?) modernity, an alternative (anti-imperialist) empire. For the first and second generation of Western scholars able to work in Central Asia, this situation is bound to carry the flavour of ‘first contact’ or ‘salvage’ ethnography. Was that era better or worse than now? Did it deserve to ‘die’? This is quite a different mode of speaking history from that of epics and genealogies that I discussed in chapter 5. In the conclusion I will return to how these different modes interact - or not.

Comparative and moralizing questions turn the past (like anthropological ‘regions’) into a flat, monochrome baseline for comparison with the present. It is part of this particular style of comparison, its method of operation, to homogenize the objects of comparison. This is echoed in semi-descriptive, semi-analytical terms such as ‘post-Socialism’ and ‘transition’. Used initially as an adjective (‘post-socialist’) or to denote a particular period of time, post-Socialism now usually denotes whatever emerged after Socialism (Hann 2002: 2). It is worth noting that Socialism also understood itself as a transitional period, a constant move towards the state of Communism. The term ‘transition’ has been critiqued for precisely this kind of teleological baggage.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, ‘transition’ has been used by Central Asian governments and representatives of Western governments alike to legitimize the temporary discomfort of ‘adjusting’ to a market economy, as part of the road-map towards a worthwhile goal (Louw 2008: 130-131).¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ The complementary view is that ‘Sovietness’, if defunct as a political entity, is not necessarily ‘over’ in people’s everyday lives. Indeed, the strong views expressed about the Soviet past in this chapter attest to its continued role. Such everyday ‘Sovietness’ is the focus of a forthcoming research collaboration I am involved in.

¹⁵⁰ Verdery (1996: 15-16) and Finke suggested ‘transformation’ as an alternative to the loaded term ‘transition’. Finke defines transformation as a fundamental, systematic and willed change (Finke 2004: 1-2). Recently the question whether contemporary Central Asia can be analyzed as a post-colonial situation has come to the fore of scholarly attention (Adams 2008, Chioni Moore 2001, Kandiyoti 2002, Khalid 2007, Kideckel 2009, Verdery 2002)



Figure 18: Ruins of a shoe factory in Toktogul town

Among Mysterious Ruins and Typologies of Time

A fascination with contrast and rupture may in fact be an enduring ‘relic’ of the Marxist-Leninist view of history, which conceives of it as a series of revolutions that aim to *overcome* the past. An emphasis on perceiving and valuing change over stasis is however also a feature of the rhetoric of modernity, as well as current trends in ethnography. If revolution is at the heart of Communism, it is ironic that people like Koichubek Ata remember late Socialism now primarily as an era of stability (or Russian *zastoi*: stagnation).

If a ‘structural’ account (e.g. ‘*this is how a kolkhoz worked*’), communicates a sense of order and stability on the small scale, it also highlights big historic shifts. The sense of rupture, of radical discontinuity that both Koichubek and Nurakun Ata express is more specifically often framed as decline, decay and abandonment. This trope of describing the

Soviet past as relatively static, homogenous and in ruins is frequently echoed in academic descriptions (Humphrey 1998, Nazpary 2002, Reeves 2007b). The ruined infrastructure, the disintegrating roads and dilapidated stables I evoked in looking at Bel Aldy, the tendency to ‘stand among the ruins’ is also marked in TV documentaries and travelogues on the area (e.g. BBC 2003 documentary series ‘Welcome to the Stans’, Windish 2007, Thubron 2007). Hence, the talk of ruins is not only the sentiment of our informants, but part of the historical positioning of a host of authors.

Such a portrayal makes the Soviet regime become the (sole?) actor, the source in any historical explanation of political trajectories since its demise. On the other hand, like archaeologists’ studying much earlier empires, both post-Soviet citizens and scholars wrestle with the mystery of its demise: why did it fall? And if these enquiries invoke a lost civilization, this fits with a wider view of Central Asia as a region of many formerly glorious empires and high civilizations. But it is not always a *Soviet* other that serves as a baseline for comparison. Here are statements by two elderly gentlemen, who felt strongly about ‘the way it was’:

Nurakun Ata:

‘People used to have bozo [slightly alcoholic drink from fermented grain] together, ladies a cup or two as well. It doesn't make you drunk, it's just sociable: everyone is invited and sits around a big kazan of bozo. It's not like that with vodka now.’

Azimkul Ata:

‘Bir söz aitip bereim - I'll tell you one thing: I gave my daughter a bride-wealth feast for seven days, people came in three cars for it! I was young and strong, we gave lots of cows and all. Now people just celebrate for one day. That's the way it is in this period [‘oshondoi zamanda’]: it's also because there's less money around.’

This way of thinking about the past tessellates closely with the way Kaneff describes talk of ‘the old days’ in post-Socialist Bulgaria (Kaneff 2004). Pine calls ‘generalized memories’ one register that Gorale villagers in Poland use to speak of hunger, war, work, rituals and Communism. *‘These are strangely impersonal, and speak to ...what it was like*

before' (Pine 2007: 123). When assessing the quality of life or current morals, events have no place in the tale. When Nurakun Ata described rounds of *bozo* drinking, he referred to this as a *salt* (custom). *Salt* is usually used to qualify a practice as good, whereas the evaluation of *traditsiia* in the Soviet period was much more fraught. In general, Socialist ideology suspected the 'old' as superstitious and patriarchal 'relics' (DeWeese 2009), assigning it a carefully circumscribed role as 'folklore' in the service of nation-building.

Considering the examples of celebrating weddings the proper Kyrgyz way, sociability and the collective farm 'as it was', one can characterize how people talk about pre-Soviet Kyrgyzness as 'tradition or custom 1' and Sovietness as 'tradition 2'.¹⁵² Certainly the way our informants speak, and the way we write about the Soviet Union is often cast as an investigation into 'tradition' as opposed to a current troubled modernity (*transition?*). If the period between 1917 and 1991 is described as 'Soviet', this means that the 'Sovietness' of this era appears as the most *knowable* aspect of life in documents, in material vestiges, in mind-sets. Certainly the illusion of continuity, homogeneity and a united effort is one all Soviet forms of power sought to uphold (and achieved to a significant degree, for example in artistic styles, the spread of the Russian language, a centralized command economy). Even when ethnographers like Humphrey or Gullette invoke the *longue durée*, this becomes the 'other' tradition, the baseline that has little historical depth, against which Soviet policies militated (Humphrey 1998, Gullette 2006). It is a general feature of our style of historiography, that at some point, the narrative has to start: from a 'state'. Since periodizing is a kind of fixing, it makes change look like it happens in sudden rushes rather than gradually.

Post-Socialism, post-colonialism, revolutions, modernity and traditions: in all these, we are speaking the language of what Johannes Fabian calls typological times, other examples of which are literate and preliterate, peasant versus industrialized or 'hot' and 'cold' societies. This is not every-day time, nor the physical time of seasons and generations. As Fabian has noted, othering the past in such a way is a distancing device (Fabian 1983: 65). If the individuals quoted here, Alimkhan and Nargiza, Azimkul, Nurakun and Koichubek, are often pre-occupied with comparing the past and present, with sudden shifts and traditions

¹⁵² The relationship between traditions 1 and 2 is fraught, as Bruce Grant has remarked: '*How much can be remembered after 70 years of social re-education? How does this make us rethink the very notion of tradition, when so many Nivkh traditions are, in effect, statist ones?*' (Grant 1995: xii). My answer is to interpret descriptions of *salt* or *traditsiia* in independent Kyrgyzstan as a badge of value rather than proof of antiquity.

variously conceived, so are Central Asian state actors. It is to state narratives on history that I now turn.

Stately Chronopolitics

The Uzbek state defines itself and the nation in relation to its glorious past. The Kazakh government in contrast defines itself in relation to a glorious future (Cummings 2009: 1091). Meanwhile the Soviet-built History Museum looms on Bishkek's main square, the content little changed since independence. How do Kyrgyz state narratives intersect, or disconnect from Koichubek Ata's memories? What is the relationship between public and personal ideas of time? While a thorough investigation of this topic would require a thesis in its own right, I here give some context of state narratives, in order to situate my discussion of personal narratives about 'becoming cultured', collectivization and privatization.

Central Asian states are in an awkward position in relation to the predecessor Soviet state. Unlike Eastern European countries, they did not exist as nation-states before the Stalinist delineation of republics in the 1920s and 30s. And although all the presidents except for Kyrgyzstan's also headed the republics in Soviet times, Communist ideology has officially been shed. Thus Central Asian states have the difficult task of explaining this conjunction, the need to define themselves against the Soviet past and the need for continuity in institutions, personnel and territory. All the Central Asian states have partly continued, partly vigorously initiated rituals of citizenship and commemorating the nation. In Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan these rituals of statehood feature a strong presidential cult. In Kyrgyzstan, while the current government certainly seeks to strengthen the presidency, since independence the state has cultivated core symbols of the nation such as Manas.¹⁵³

Speaking of Uzbekistan, Louw describes the rule of memory as a technology of power. A regime can point to the parts of reality people should pay attention to, and how they should interpret these (Louw 2007: 130). Calling these elements 'ancient', 'primitive remnants', 'nomadic' or 'national' is a value-judgment as well as a categorization, in the typologizing mode we encountered above. President Karimov in Uzbekistan has been particularly explicit and directive on the new national historiography, rectifying Soviet

¹⁵³ As we saw in chapter 4, certain intellectuals and politicians have recently also advocated Kyrgyzchylyk as a national ideology/religion.

accounts, creating a narrative of Uzbek glory and ancient national roots. Kyrgyz academic publications also advocate history as self-knowledge and moral orientation in relation to globalization (Japarov 2005: 22, Mokeev 2008). In this familiar narrative of forging an imagined community, the difficulty for Central Asian states is that they are all multi-ethnic states with a titular nationality. Thus Tajik and Uzbek historians endlessly dispute the ethnicity (i.e. state ownership) of the Great and Good of Central Asian history (Suyarkulova: forthcoming).

But a re-evaluation of the past also raises questions of justice and identity, demonstrated by the Baltic independence movements during *glasnost* and the influential campaign by the *Memorial* organization for acknowledging the victims of the Soviet state. The *glasnost*-era novel by Kyrgyz poet laureate Chingiz Aitmatov lent a new word to the movement for revising history's rights and wrongs: *mankurtism*. In 'A day lasts more than a hundred years' (1983) Aitmatov recounts a form of torture, where captured enemies are made into obedient slaves by robbing them of their memories. The *mankurt* slave in the novel ends up killing his own mother, who tries to remind him of his identity and *uruu*. The *mankurt* has served as a powerful metaphor for the suppression of irregular identities and knowledges by Soviet powers and continues to motivate the search for true pasts and belongings, both as an oppositional stance and state enterprise.

Turning Point 1: Collectivization

There were certain moments of the past that stood out in people's memories: collectivization from the 1930s onward, and privatization in the 1990s. Part of this singling out was of course to do with my own curiosities: I was after all known to be researching relations to land.¹⁵⁴ I discuss privatization, which chronologically happened *after* the demise of the Soviet Union, in the context of the Soviet Other, because this is how it turned up in conversations. It was the counter-piece to collectivization, for better or worse. It was where 'chaos' was most noticeable, it was where different ideas of justice and equality came to light. Collectivization and privatization were not single events, but extended over a decade or so, and thus sometimes look more like periods. My purpose of giving oral accounts of these events is not to reconstruct them. There is no need to rehearse the broad outlines of

¹⁵⁴ Other significant moments that I will not dwell on here are the 'Ürkün' uprising against tsarist rule in 1916 and the Second World War.

collectivization and privatization in Central Asia.¹⁵⁵ Rather I want to discover *how* people talk about these experiences and events, what meaning they have in the present as personal experience and as recounted history. In the reminiscences I heard, the *kolkhoz* was routinely described as a *state*, with only one significant change taking place between its formation and dissolution, namely the creation of larger *sovkhos* in the 1950s and the cash wages and increased mechanization these entailed.¹⁵⁶ Accounts of collectivization and privatization however were told as moments when the past became a process rather than a condition: a kind of revolution.

28th April 2008

I have come to visit Bazarkul Ata with his niece, a sprightly elderly lady keen to introduce me. Bazarkul Ata is often recommended to me as a knowledgeable person, but I am also warned not to look into his eyes too much. He is feared for his power to give the evil eye. Now one of the richest men in the commune, people say that he used to be of an envious disposition. Does he know of his damaging powers, I ask my host parents. They reflect and decide he probably does, and tries to avoid it. Indeed, unlike other authoritative men, he does not seek sustained eye contact during our conversation. But Bazarkul Ata is also said to be a *'kiin kishi'*. *Kiin* literally means 'hard', 'difficult', but in this context denotes an intelligent, effective, authoritative person (*kishi*). He is someone powerful, and therefore of course also potentially 'hard', 'difficult' or even dangerous. Both reputations may flow in part from his fate. Let me turn over the word to Bazarkul himself:

'We used to live on that isolated farm past the cemetery, and then got moved into the main village in 1963, when electricity came. We were both [niece and uncle] exiled to live in the gorge with our kulak family, when we were young. ... I was born in the gorge in 1928. ... My grand-father had three wives and was the bii. ... He was friendly with Dyikanbai, who made him a bii. ... After the revolution my grand-father was called a kulak, they took away all his 700

¹⁵⁵ The literature on these includes Kamp 2001, Ohayon 2004, Pianciola 2004, Kerven 2003, Sartori and Trevisani 2007 and in other areas of the former Soviet Union: Humphrey 1998, Hann 2003, Lampland 1995, Finke 2004.

¹⁵⁶ In accounts of how things worked in Soviet times, I never heard a difference being made between the *kolkhoz* (collective farm) and *sovkhos* (state farm) as distinct forms of ownership, separate steps towards Communism. The terms were often used interchangeably.

*horses, 13.000 sheep and seven camels. ¹⁵⁷ *He was sent to prison in Osh with all his children, but came back. His son became sel soviet [head of village council]; they were all 'kiin kishiler'.**

Bazarkul Ata describes his grandfather as having great wealth, and being allied to Dyikanbai Khan, the powerful ruler we encountered in chapter 5. In contrast to the discrimination other *kulak* children faced, neither Bazarkul nor his father seem to have been discriminated against in education or in their career.¹⁵⁸ Several people emphasized that people like Bektash *Bii* were falsely accused, because they were simply good people, leaders, rather than rich men. People voiced different opinions whether in principle it was right to disinherit the rich. The most positive oral account of collectivization I heard, from the middle-aged journalist Almaz, is quite close to the tone of publications in the late Soviet period (e.g. Galitskii 1976). Almaz told me:

'After the Revolution Soviet power was established in Sary Kamysh and there were many kolkhozes. A new life. The kolkhoz had to be established, but there were many enemies, they had to destroy the rich people. People wanted to take cattle from the rich people, but they were afraid of their power.'

Continuing my conversation with Bazarkul, I asked him whether people had hidden or slaughtered their animals during collectivization, like in Kazakhstan. He answered:

'No, they were too afraid of being sent to prison, everyone gave up their animals. ... If the kolkhoz couldn't fulfil [the plan], the akim [regional administrator, term used colloquially for tsarist, Communist and post-Soviet officials of this rank] would give us money to buy more beasts to hand over.'

¹⁵⁷ During the early Bolshevik period, *manap-bais* were classified as a type of 'dealer, entrepreneur and capitalist', i.e. *kulak*. Collectivization was engineered partly as a method to defeat *bai* and *bii* influence (Gullette 2006: 86).

¹⁵⁸ Where Hann and Sárkány remark on Eastern Europe that it is rare for former *kulak* families to reassert themselves (2003: 122), there were quite a significant number of such cases in my field site, also noted in Russia by Fitzpatrick (1994: 245). Fitzpatrick points out that after the last dekulakization campaign in 1932-3, policy on how to deal with *kulaks* was very incoherent, e.g. on their right to vote, join a *kolkhoz* or return home after exile (Fitzpatrick 1994: 239-41).

...We didn't have a lot of animals, and it was war time. ... In the kolkhoz the mood was terrible. ... The sovkhos was created in 1950, and split from the neighbouring commune in 1957. For a while there were four kolkhozes, then they were merged, which was much better. ... I studied as a vet, worked as the main vet for the kolkhoz for 16 years, and then was made ui fermer [literally 'cow farmer', head of a cattle production unit] for thirty years. I was responsible for milk production and delivery, for meat production and fulfilling the plan. I was responsible for 700 cows ... one cow herd would be given 20 to 40 animals, depending on whether they needed milking. ... I had to give a report to the sovkhos director every month. We used to plant lots of grain on the heights of Shai, and then distribute it from the warehouse. But now there's no discipline or order.'

Although many people like Bazarkul and Nurakun made reference to the hunger and deprivations suffered in the 1930s and 1940s, these were rarely identified as a direct consequence of the collectivization drive, as it is described in the literature that prompted my question to Bazarkul (Ercilasun 2009, Ohayon 2004). Like Bazarkul, people often stayed vague about the causes of their difficulties ('*the mood was terrible*').¹⁵⁹ If an explanation was given, people pointed to the Second World War. The hunger of the war years was often contrasted with the upswing from the 1950s onward when mechanized agriculture, higher education, pensions, free medical care, a secure monetary income and supply of goods became more and more widely available (Fitzpatrick 1994: 317-9). Even Bazarkul, who suffered so much from the establishment of the collective, made a successful career and fulfilled his ambitions as one of the richest men of the village.

In contrast, Nurakun Ata, whose father was also condemned as a *kulak* never recovered the confidence Bazarkul Ata displays. But nor is he feared. Nurakun's father died in the early thirties. Some say he was killed by the Communists, some say it was the evil eye and yet others that the authorities used the evil eye against him. Nurakun Ata grew up an orphan, looking after his mother and younger brother. Though he is known as knowledgeable

¹⁵⁹ Humphrey also notes people using the impersonal plural in Buryatia, talking about purges: '*They took the lamas behind the hill and shot them*' (Humphrey 2003: 197-8). A recent oral history project in Uzbekistan also noted that interviewees often used the passive voice about collectivization, and did not implicate the poor in dekulakization. However, Kamp and Russell also note that many poor people in Uzbekistan showed no regret for having dispossessed rich people (Kamp and Zanca 2009: 20-1).

and virtuous, an excellent saddle-maker and hunter, he has never accepted formal positions of leadership and avoids exercising his authority. Nor has he regained the kind of wealth Bazarkul Ata can boast of. Though I am adopted in Nurakun's close family, am welcomed and protected by him, an attempt to record his story made him very reticent. I never tried the microphone on a person with such a past again. Nurakun Ata still carries his work book, medals and honours with him at all times, wrapped in plastic and stowed in the inner pocket of his jacket: as if his work record might one day save his life.¹⁶⁰ I will return below to how political struggles and casualties are commemorated, or not. But let me now compare how people speak of the 'companion piece' of collectivization, the privatization policies of the 1990s.

Turning Point 2: Privatization

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of collectives are commonly mentioned in one breath. Privatization is regularly blamed on Gorbachev, although collective farms were in fact dissolved by an independent Kyrgyz government in the course of the 1990s. And indeed, one could argue that privatization was a direct consequence of reforms that eventually triggered the collapse of the centralized economy and state-funded infrastructure. Alimkhan Apa, who had such good memories of her childhood, now leads a very different existence. Her daughter-in-law Damira explained:

'We don't have any animals; they were all sold or died. We used to be workers on the sovkhos. ... Privatization wasn't fair here; it was done better in Bel Aldy. We didn't receive a horse or a cow, a communal stable or anything. We got six or eight bad quality sheep, the chongdor [bigwigs] took the fat healthy ones for themselves or their relatives and friends. For example, we didn't hear about the day when the stables and things were being divided, so we didn't get anything. So now we just live off our land, we got 0.15 hectares each of irrigated land, plus some dry land.'

I found it very difficult to find out anything more specific about 'who did what' in this process. Certainly such questions were bound to stir up old resentments, scandals and shame

¹⁶⁰ I take up the theme of work again in chapter 7.

and could be dangerous in the wrong hands. Perhaps such questions undermined unity in the same way as pointing out that people had been ‘added’ to the Korosh lineage. Reluctance to speak ill of the dead, and perhaps also a sense that these bad times and quarrels were irrelevant now, may have played a part in steering away from specifics.

Anyone living in the village at the time of privatisation, and anyone who worked for the *sovkhos* was entitled to a share of agricultural land, livestock and other assets like machinery. Unlike in Eastern Europe, in Kyrgyzstan there was no question of restituting pre-Soviet property relations. In effect, a government decree in 1994 forced all *sovkhos* and *kolkhos* directors to divide-up land and resources among their workers, formally as a loan for 99 years (but it is treated and colloquially named as ownership). Some co-operatives survived for a number of years, but the vast majority faltered as ‘the authorities’ sold off whatever assets there were, as theft, running costs and *sovkhos* debts depleted any share workers might claim. As I discussed in chapters 2 and 3, the process of changing property relations continues, as in the case of the Naryn dams.

Compared to employees in industry, agricultural workers on the whole fared better in the 90s: most received *something* as a sort of inheritance from the deceased collective, certainly land, and a few sheep which could immediately be used for subsistence, as in Alimkhan Apa’s family. But since livestock were immediately needed for consumption, or were exchanged for other essentials, they flooded the local market and went for as little as a packet of tea. Those who did not already possess a sizeable herd, and the skills to go with it, often could not hold on to their livestock share. Thus asked about the source of his wealth, Bazarkul Ata commented laconically: *‘I had plenty of livestock already, and I didn’t sell it afterwards like everyone else.’*

We have heard Alimkhan’s daughter-in-law speak with bitterness about the process of privatization. The misinformation she noted was a common complaint. False rumours about accepting livestock being attached to obligations to deliver produce to the government, were often felt to be intentionally put about by ‘the authorities’. People often used the phrase ‘the big ones ate it all’ (*chongdor baari jeshiti*) to describe this.¹⁶¹ Since people often feel poverty as shameful, Alimkhan Apa’s account of her adventures on a silver saddle may also be a way of retrieving dignity, and obliquely, a warning: our current situation is not our fault, it could

¹⁶¹ It remains a question for me in how far people expected *equal* shares: in other areas of life, such as inheritance or apportioning meat at table, portions are received by all, but they are weighted to favour elders and guests.

happen to anyone. Anarbek, the NGO worker we encountered earlier, has a very different perspective on privatization:

'When people received their share from the sovkhos, they didn't know how to prepare hay, didn't want to keep sheep. People thought it was uiat [shameful]'. He mimes a housewife exclaiming: 'Me, I'm not going to be a shepherd!' People had lost their roots in livestock keeping, had lost the connection. They understood ten years later that the state wasn't going to help them anymore. And that foreign states also weren't going to help. Russia, Kazakhstan: it was all 'öz özüchün' [everyone for themselves]. There was a great inertia, and no proper analysis.'

According to the World Bank, the process in Kyrgyzstan has been softer than in Kazakhstan because there people had even less roots in their livestock herding past. Here the transition lasted five years, after that people could stand on their own. They changed from keeping only sheep to including goats, from growing wheat to maize, from ploughing with a tractor to ploughing with a horse. ... Kyrgyzstan's way will not be the same as Europe or America. Anin jolu bölökchö, [it will go its own separate way], it will be a combination of features.'

Here, Anarbek explains not being able to make a living as collective amnesia (*mankurtizm?*). Anarbek was himself involved in organizing privatization in the 90s and believes firmly in its necessity. He also sees the period of transition (his word) as a crisis that is past, lasting 5-10 years, and that Kyrgyzstan accomplished this more smoothly than neighbouring Kazakhstan. In Anarbek's scheme, the less change there was in the first economic reform program (collectivization, industrialization), the more smooth the second transition was.

But the 'transition', the 'chaos' of 'now' is more than an economic downturn and re-organization of the economy. James Ferguson has written eloquently about 'Expectations of Modernity' in the Zambian Copperbelt: he encounters nostalgia for a modern past, dread of a 'backward' future and the myth of modernity breaking down (Ferguson 1999:14). Neither the anthropologist nor Zambians feel they understand what is happening:

'The rules of the game were being abruptly changed while we watched: urban food prices skyrocketed, pensions people had expected to depend upon for their lifetime security became suddenly worthless, previously unheard-of and horrifying crimes became commonplace.' (Ferguson 1999: 19).

Word for word, this description could have been written of the early 90s in Kyrgyzstan. Ferguson points out that this 'expulsion' (what he calls 'abjection') is something very different from never having had 'a place on the map' in the first place. It is an active disconnection, and the resulting feeling of disconnect implies a relationship, not the absence of a relationship (Ferguson 1999: 235-8).

Why did the Soviet way of life collapse? I was curious about the fact that if I asked what had happened, most people responded with a shrug, and noted that *'the big people know about that'*. Or they gave a version of the explanation that Gorbachev had done a deal with America, Yeltsin had been drunk and had signed the wrong papers, and the like. Here are two examples of the kind of conversations I had about this, the first with Gulnara, the teacher who complained about the lack of water in her village:

Jeanne: *Why did the Soviet Union collapse? I do not understand...*

Gulnara: *Since we're not specialized in that, we can't tell you exactly. In my opinion the Soviet Union collapsed because of Gorbachev's privatization policy. I am saying this because before Gorbachev we did not even have the idea of separating. As soon as Gorbachev became president and started privatization, it happened. And as we do not work in the Party we do not know who dissolved the Soviet Union.'*

Töröbek Ata: *'And before then, England, the Soviet Union and America were united and could hardly defeat your Germany. And later only one person was able to destroy everything. It was Yeltsin! Yeltsin and Gorbachev dissolved it.'*

Jeanne: *Why, I do not understand?*

Töröbek: *I don't know. Until then it was a great power. All three countries united and could hardly defeat your relatives [the Germans]. And now just one person dissolved it.'*

The reasons for its disintegration are much debated by scholars too. Was it because of the way the Soviet media and communication channels routinely celebrated achievements and underplayed difficulties, because of the unsustainability of subsidies to Central Asia, the nature of the political system (such as Gulnara's sense that the Party would know what was going on)? Did the Soviet Union fall because of the arms race? Or because of bad leadership, corruption and stagnation? Intrinsic flaws in Leninist-Marxist ideology, its faulty application or Stalinist perversion? The search for explanations is also driven by a concern: if *another*, successful modernity could unpredictably implode, it might happen to the post-Soviet or 'Western' variety too.¹⁶²

The Toktogul valley experienced a very heavy earthquake in 1992. The collapse of Soviet life often appeared as a similar kind of natural catastrophe. In both the above quotes, if there is a cause, it is a single individual. 'Heroes' appear again as the movers and shakers of history, independently of, say, reform movements. At the same time, it is a matter of wonder that one man (Yeltsin or Gorbachev) was able to single-handedly abolish the Soviet order. It was not the people (*el*) who made history, or could even tell history in this case, but 'big people'.¹⁶³ Vigh has suggested that in situations of chronic crisis, such as in Guinea Bissau, as the present fragments and the future becomes opaque, it makes people feel less able to act, and limited in their agency (Vigh 2008: 13-4). This may be such a situation, where people feel they a) do not cause history and b) cannot even identify the agents of history. As Bazarkul says, '*now there's no discipline or order*'.

But there may be a different reason for the 'shrug' or blaming leaders. Since the events we were talking about were the cause of losses to the people quoted above, blaming an individual leader kept everyone else blame free. Humphrey interprets a Buryat story about Stalin being the fated reincarnation of a 'blue elephant' in this way, as it erases individual accountability, even as people feel complicit in Stalin's crimes (Humphrey 2003: 176).

¹⁶² Yurchak (2007) argues that the fixed form of Soviet language and ritual became decoupled from meaning in late Socialism. Ideology was made meaningful in many different ways, so people replicated forms that came to appear eternal and monolithic, but the hidden disjunctures of meaning exploded any kind of unity. This monolithic appearance made 'the end' at once more unimaginable, and more likely.

¹⁶³ It was noticeably people who had been in positions of authority at the end of the Soviet era like Liudmilla Fedorovna, Anarbek, Tolkunbek or Kadyrbek who blamed the fall of the Soviet Union on declining economic viability and rise in corruption and dishonesty rather than the supreme leader.

Becoming Cultured

When I asked Kadyrbek Ata, who earlier recounted the Korosh *sanjira*, what he thought of the legacy of the Soviet Union, he explained:

'I have understood what you are asking. The Soviet Union was good for our Kyrgyzstan. When we were studying they would give us sweets and bread. They looked after the children of poor people. Russian revolutionaries were good to us, they were not bad. They brought us up, they taught us. ... Even though I studied little I am so grateful to the Russian revolutionaries that they gave us equality. Otherwise the Russian imperialists would have killed all the Kyrgyz.'

In Kadyrbek's account, the classic image of Soviet Russians as elder brothers who bring up other peoples to their level and at the same time confer equality is quite explicit, as is the distinction of tsarist Russia as imperialist, from which the (Russian) Soviets saved the Kyrgyz.¹⁶⁴ This sounds just like the kind of 'civilizing mission' other late modern empires such as Britain proposed, but in the Soviet case it was indeed much more vigorously and successfully pursued, and inflected with a much smaller degree of racism. Kadyrbek continued to recount how his environment gradually changed:

When we were little there were no cars, there was nothing. ... In about 1939 the first plane was seen. Otherwise nothing flew. [In 1941] I finished the seventh grade at Krupskaja school [named after Lenin's wife]. ... There was no school here. We studied in a simple house. ... At that time there were no chairs. There was a felt carpet. We sat on it and studied. ... When we were in the second grade there were seats, two or four meter long benches. One was lower, another was higher. You would sit on one and write on the other. That's how we studied in second grade. It was a bit more cultured, you sit and write, kul'turnii ... just a bit.'

¹⁶⁴ Mentioning tsarist Russia as a threat, Kadyrbek Ata is likely making oblique reference to the *Ürkün* period in 1916, when Kyrgyz revolted against allocating land to Russian settlers and the war draft.

Most of my attributes, a young educated woman pursuing her own professional goals, international travel, comparative wealth all pointed to me being ‘*kul’turnii*’, while Kadyrbek and Nurakun Ata, though my seniors, were less so on this scale. As in every fieldwork encounter, these differences probably shaped our conversation: in commenting on inferiority or superiority, in our subtle and not so subtle desires, in mutual curiosity and seeking recognition of our full humanity from each other. It is likely that the vocabulary of becoming cultured and tradition featured so prominently because of these dynamics, and because of the assumption that ethnographers are interested in something called ‘tradition’. Nurakun Ata has vivid memories of his first encounter with the Soviet army, in the early 1950s:

We would wear chokoi [hand-made boots of leather and felt]. I left for the military service wearing chokoi. And the Russians [looked at them] and said “what good wool”. We would wear chapan coats too. Oh, may people not experience what we experienced! Look at those who drink vodka! They do not work and drink vodka.

It took us two weeks to reach the army. We were so dirty. People were watching a film. They were surprised when they saw us. And the sergeant led us to the bathhouse, gave us clothes and divided us into units.’

Nurakun Ata easily conveys his astonishment at the film, the bathhouse, the uniforms and regiments. We also hear the delicacy of his self-consciousness at the suddenly strange clothing he was wearing, the state of his hygiene after travelling a long time. On the other hand, he also mentions that the Russian soldiers commented approvingly on the quality of his footwear, perhaps warmer than their modern army issue boots. Somewhat cryptically, Nurakun suddenly exclaims about heavy drinking and sloth. Perhaps memories of the Russian army reminded him: it was likely his first sustained encounter with vodka.¹⁶⁵ Neither inferior boots nor booze are signs of a better life. Among widespread alcohol use and abuse, Kyrgyz apologists often claim that this is a new Russian custom they were unfortunately introduced to.

Similar as it sounds, the Russian *kul’turnii* (nouns: *kul’tura* or *kul’turnost*) does not have exactly the same meaning as ‘culture’ in English. Though the concepts of ‘culture’ or

¹⁶⁵ It is also possible that he is making reference to his very easy-going youngest son, whom he lives with. Nargiza (see chapter 5) is this son’s wife.

rather ‘civilization’, ‘*kul’tura*’ and ‘*madaniiat*’ are closely related, they are not synonyms.¹⁶⁶ My Kyrgyz interlocutors often used *kul’tura*, an imported word, to describe something they felt had been imported to Kyrgyzstan, taught like literacy. The concept of *kul’tura* often included the Russian language itself. There were occasions when Kyrgyz-speakers voiced the opinion that the Kyrgyz language was alright for everyday life and folk poetry, but not a language suited to express scientific thought, and the high literature of Pushkin and Tolstoy. *Kul’tura* as Kadyrbek encounters it at his first school means education, for personal and social betterment. The reader may recall the story of progress embodied by the dam and *kul’turnii* worker’s town of Kara Kul in chapter 4. Fellow anthropologist Madeleine Reeves was often described as Russian (*orus*), not only because of her light skin, but also because she had city ways (Reeves 2007a: 41). All these comments reflect something of the Soviet schema of *kul’tura*, which was based around the poles of ‘international’ and ‘folk’ culture. ‘International’ culture would cover essentially European high culture forms transmitted through metropolitan Russia such as ballet, novels, and orchestras. Institutions like an opera house were established in the Kyrgyz capital as well as science-based, mechanized and electrified types of technology.

From the perspective of the Soviet scheme of culture, the Kyrgyz may well have had *madaniiat* (a word now associated with folklore) before the Soviet era, but they were not ‘enlightened’ in the European, Communist sense of *kul’tura*. This type of culture came to be seen as a series of objects, but also as something one could build or destroy (Grant 1995: 160).¹⁶⁷ ‘National’ or ‘folk’ culture meanwhile was interpreted as a set of elements that could be displayed, for example traditional dress or dances during festivals, but also stamped in passports (Adams 1999: 17-18).¹⁶⁸ ‘*Traditional life was at once lauded (as a marker of freedom of peoples) and suppressed (as a lingering resistance to abstract notions of Soviet homogeneity)*’ (Grant 1995: 128-9).¹⁶⁹ All these accounts point to a world coming into being from where ‘*there was nothing*’, as Kadyrbek Ata said. They all aspire to a European model of civilization, modelled in the capital Bishkek, and beyond, in Moscow.¹⁷⁰ However, there

¹⁶⁶ See also chapter on work on relationship between *madaniiat*, *tarbiia* and *tartip*.

¹⁶⁷ See also Anderson on a similar notion of *kul’tura* for Evenki in Siberia, translating more like ‘civilization’ than ‘culture’ and implying constructing houses, schools, electricity (1996:104).

¹⁶⁸ I will return to the influence of these dichotomies on Kyrgyz literature and music in chapter 8.

¹⁶⁹ On the role of certain forms of labour as *kul’turnii* see also chapter 7.

¹⁷⁰ Hoffman argues that on the one hand, knowledge of classics such as Tolstoy or Mayakovski were meant to unify people, on the other hand the insecure new elite needed signs of difference such as going to theatre,

were soon Kyrgyz figures such as the bard Toktogul and composer Bokonbaev, to carry cultural progress further. Baktybek, one of Bokonbaev's descendants, is the keeper of a museum dedicated to Bokonbaev in the Toktogul area and showed me round the exhibits:

'Joomart Bokonbaev was our Pushkin; he also died young and started our literary language. His father was killed in the revolution, and his mother remarried a rich man, so he was chased off and grew up in an orphanage.¹⁷¹ At that time, Kyrgyzstan was a Russian colony, they didn't have culture. It was only after the revolution that the first intelligentsia came about, of which Bokonbaev was a member.'

Baktybek further described Bokonbaev as a '*founder* [Russian: *osnovatel*'] of *Kyrgyz culture*', famed for his collection of Toktogul's songs in the 1920s, opera librettos and translation of King Lear. Like Toktogul, he has streets named after him, statues in the capital's park and his likeness printed on Kyrgyz banknotes. But Baktybek says few people visit the museum, and is quite upset about the attempt of the village development committee to turn the museum and its park into agricultural land. He says they are '*temnie*' (Russian: dark, ignorant) people, easily swayed this way or that by some agitators. '*They don't realize wealth of the mind and soul is better in the long run than something in the pocket,*' he comments bitterly. The vocabulary of benighted ignorance is reminiscent of Communist, and more generally, Enlightenment rhetoric in which people strive for light, a greater humanity, 'growth of consciousness' and freedom. The imagery of light and darkness also surfaces in Yrysbek's recent experience of labour migration:

10th of July 2008:

Yrysbek is finally back home. Aijamal has been missing her husband terribly through the long winter months. He left to stay with his sister in Turkey and worked in a furniture factory. Now summer has come, along with many visits from family working abroad, most

clothes, manners and knowledge of communist theory to differentiate them from the masses (Hoffman 2003: 138).

¹⁷¹ '*Killed in the revolution*': this phrase leaves unclear on which side these people were fighting, whether they were participants or by-standers in the *Ürkün* uprising, or if they were victims of general unrest and hunger.

often in Russia or Kazakhstan. Yrysbek is looking well: he's always been bright-eyed and neat, but now his hair cut seems somehow more precise, and his T-shirt and jeans look particularly stylish. They are clearly not from the local bazaar. He shows me the disk of pictures he's brought back on the TV, moving me through the sights of Istanbul, his sister's comfortable flat and the picnics beneath Mediterranean pines that he enjoyed. Aijamal had already told me that Turkey had changed her husband's ideas quite a lot:

'He used not to think about the future much. People [in our village] swear a lot. Yrysbek used to do it too, he used to say "everyone does it here, why shouldn't I?" People in the capital know Toktogul as a place where people swear a lot. ... Now, Yrysbek's ideas have changed in Turkey. He says it's like in a fairy tale there: everything is clean and amazing. He feels [our village] is like darkness, like a cave.

He used to be digging the field or something, and then his friends would call him out for a drink, and he would just go with them, get drunk, and leave the work for another day. If I complained he would say: "so what, I'm not an alcoholic, I'm normal". Now he sees it differently. He's become a bit more kul'turnii.'

In Aijamal's view, Yrysbek's travel experience has precipitated a new relationship with alcohol, with education, work, and the future. The biographies discussed earlier in this chapter demonstrate how some men derived their Soviet era authority partly from their mobility, and familiarity with prestigious and powerful locations such as Moscow. Something similar could be said of Yrysbek. I asked Yrysbek why he thought people in Turkey had a better life: was it because they had nicer cars and flats? No, that wasn't it, he said.

'It's that they behave better, they're hard workers but not too interested in money, like people here who only want to own lots of animals and things.'

Jeanne: *'Aren't your friends here offended if you don't drink with them anymore?'*

Yrysbek: *'Yeah, but that's their problem. I drink a little beer at parties, but not sitting out in the street anymore. ... Now is the time of life for work, until you're 45 or 50. I want to build a really good house here, to repair everything and*

then go abroad with Aijamal, to a new country. Turkey is good, but I'm curious, I'd like to see more of the world.'

Coming out of the 'cave' into the bright fairy tale of Turkey, Yrysbek seems to have discovered a new work ethic, or perhaps simply something to work for, along with other signs of being civilized. These dreams, ones that have come within his grasp, have changed his relationship with his friends in the village, and the way he thinks about his family's future. The opportunity to travel to cosmopolitan destinations, the possibility of realizing aspirations and at the same time living virtuously are exactly the kind of things real nostalgics feel they have lost with the passing of the Soviet order. To both Liudmilla Fedorovna and Yrysbek, the present looks rather dark. To Liudmilla Fedorovna, it is the past that looks brighter, while to Yrysbek, it is the immediate future. Their cosmopolitan aspirations are quite differently orientated.

However, it is not necessary to travel as far as Turkey to encounter and acquire *kul'tura* in better cultivated places. Aijamal is from the main village in our commune, some two kilometres across the river gully. I ask her whether she sees any differences between her home and our smaller village. 'Well, yes': she hesitates, puts her words carefully. I think she is a bit worried about insulting 'my' home village.

*'People here are a little less cultured than in the main village, especially ten or fifteen years ago. At that time, people wouldn't send their children to school, they didn't understand the worth of education. They would say: "You're not a genius, you're not going to be a Stalin, nothing will come out of you." But now more people are travelling to the capital and all over, bringing back ideas.'*¹⁷²

Apart from attitudes and opportunities of education, features that people commonly compared among villages as *kul'turnii* were asphalted roads, running water, houses and institutions of more than one storey, perhaps even a museum. The local school headmistress made a direct link between the physical distance from the district centre and quality of education available in the village. She commented on the lack of stimulation for students, for example to prove their skills at *olimpiada* competitions. It is also much harder for remote

¹⁷² *'Stalin bolalbaisang, senden eshteke chikpait'*. Note that here Stalin is evoked as a model to aspire to, rather than say, a Kyrgyz or contemporary leader.

schools to attract good teachers. In people's sentiments about village schools and work in richer countries, and in Nargiza's experience, we find certain kinds of places indexing civilization. In each of these cases, we find the quality of *kul'tura* located close to urban centres (Toktogul, Kara Kul, the capital).

Communist leaders in fact attempted to reframe peasants and herders as rural workers, since the revolution would start from the more modern, conscious industrial labourers. So both Communist ideology as well as high modernist economic theory advocated turning the countryside into a mechanized version of city living and factory production (Kaneff 2004: 41-2). Though the poles of country and city might look worlds apart, if you recall Raima and Nurik's trip to Bishkek, and how city relatives keep livestock with their rural kin, the degree of dependence and frequency of movement between them is integral to the lives of many in Toktogul – and Bishkek.¹⁷³

Whereas the headmistress portrays our school as comparatively successful, Aijamal and Yrysbek have no stake in defending the status quo, and instead look to import, or escape into more *kul'tura* elsewhere. As in Ferguson's example of the Zambian Copperbelt, along with a value-laden temporal positioning, goes a kind of spatial awareness: other places stand in relation to 'here' as more or less *kul'turnii*, as more or less of the past, more or less *distant* or *remote*. The disconnect, drifting away from centres like Moscow and close integration with neighbouring Soviet republics is felt particularly acutely through new border regimes, making former citizens into illegal immigrants 'abroad' (Reeves 2007a: 78). However, high culture is not necessarily of the Soviet or 'wealthy abroad' variety.

Alternative High Culture, Lost Culture

Toktogul, Bokonbaev and Stalin are examples of humble men, who became great men by improving people's lives in the early Soviet period. The journalist Almaz remembers an earlier case of a great man bringing culture to a remote village in the late 19th century:

¹⁷³ Kaneff has demonstrated how in socialist Bulgaria, the temporal scale of political and economic development on the one side, and national consciousness (pride in folklore) served as an organizing principle of relations between villages and the state (located most authoritatively in the capital) and that villagers used these poles to position themselves as closely as possible to state power (Kaneff 2004: 3-7). It would require further historical research to see whether this was the case in Soviet Central Asia.

‘A person called Raimbek was elected as the bolush [village head]. ... He came with a special written order stamped by Shabdan khan and told people that he was the head and was elected. Then he brought culture to Sary Kamysh and brought people close to civilization. Because he went to Uzbekistan and saw the agriculture was good, the architecture was different. As for Kyrgyzstan – most people were nomads: we used boz üi, we kept livestock. People would leave their houses and go to the summer pastures. ... Raimbek built mosques like in Uzbekistan, the children started to be taught, apple and apricot trees were planted. Raimbek was a person who improved the life of Sary Kamysh. He thought that after building mosques, [and] life getting better he would make people obey him. ... Life was like that: there were no streets, the area was not levelled, one house was here, another far away, there were no house numbers, no planned [Russian: planovii] streets. ... They said that kind of life was old [eskichilik]. We have to become cultured [literally ‘go to culture’: biz madaniiatka barishibiz kerek].’

This story uses elements of Enlightenment thinking, such as becoming cultured, planning and order. But Raimbek also derives his model of civilization from a more explicitly recognizable Muslim and sedentary Uzbekistan, with its mosques, schools and orchards. Clearly the model of culture this implies is a sedentary one, but not a Soviet one.¹⁷⁴ Interestingly, Almaz attributes to Raimbek an ulterior motive to civilizing people: it will make them obey him, respect his leadership. A similar desire to build power on the creation of culture in the form of new hydroelectric projects may animate the Kyrgyz government. In all the quotes above, there is a feeling that ‘civilization’ took off through the influence of great men, and particularly those influenced by the Communism of European Russia, or at least sedentary, properly Muslim Uzbekistan.

So far, the aspiration to become cultured, and the association of culture with European Russia seems to rule supreme. One might compare to the Nivkh sentiment Grant recorded in the early 90s on Sakhalin: *‘You want to study our culture? You’re too late! It’s gone! The*

¹⁷⁴ As we have seen, the question whether *mazar* pilgrimages are proper Islam is subject to heated debates. Mountainous areas are still associated with heterodoxy and *mazar* worship, agricultural valleys (Ferghana specifically) with orthodox Islam centred on worship at mosques, though both kinds of practices exist in both types of locations (Montgomery 2007: 161-3).

Soviets ruined everything' (Grant 1995: 13). I did not hear such anger expressed ten years later in Kyrgyzstan, but some protested vociferously against the idea that the Russians or Communists were the first to bring *kul'tura* or *madaniiat* to the Kyrgyz. A senior teacher insisted research on the Kyrgyz had been badly done by Russian historians. She felt that whenever they saw something skilfully made, they would claim it was not Kyrgyz, even the most magnificent graves. She said the Kyrgyz had in fact had their own writing but they wrote on leather, reed screens or felt, which is perishable. So they forgot how to write and became 'japaiy' (wild).

On a student excursion to the ancient madrasa complex and city of Burana, the lecturers emphasized fervently that Kyrgyzstan *also* has archaeology and ancient cities: just like Uzbekistan, famed for the magical Silk Road cities of Samarkand, Tashkent and Bokhara. Their insistence stood against the often equally proud insistence that the Kyrgyz were nomads (free, close to nature etc., but also without a claim to land, according to some Russian sources, cf. Bunn 2000: 245). A poet and prominent government employee spoke of the misapprehension that the Kyrgyz had not known agriculture and therefore had no notion of land ownership. He considered this theory a lie, an excuse that allowed Russian settlers to seize all the land. Current history books also emphasize that the Kyrgyz had a great empire around the 9th century.

In the political sphere, there is much talk of a resurgent tradition. Academics, politicians and voters debate whether they are seeing the resurgence of 'uruu' ties (Collins 2004, Schatz 2004, Gullette 2006). Striking a more positive note, nation-states frequently celebrate the present as a return of tradition, interrupted by an (inappropriately?) modern Soviet Union. When Anarbek spoke of privatization, he mentioned people '*losing their roots in livestock keeping*', remembering them or building on the vestiges of their connection. This is quite similar to the way Louw describes people in Uzbekistan talking about Islam: as an '*essence that is in everyone, but also something forgotten that the government should support*' (Louw 2007: 144-5). In both cases, not being able to live well is explained as collective amnesia, reminiscent of a *mankurt*. On the other hand, as Anarbek mentions, the demise of a centralized economy and collectives also spelt technical demodernization ('*they changed... from ploughing with a tractor to ploughing with a horse*'). This sentiment also emerged in Siberia in the 1990s: this is not a voluntary return to partial tradition, but one forced and one felt as a loss (Grant 1995:152). In Anarbek's view, the Soviet era caused a loss in cultural knowledge, survival skills, that now have to be re-learnt:

'We're losing a generation. Before, in the Soviet Union there was more motivation, though chances were perhaps less than now at making it. Now it depends on whether you want to, and on your head. Then you have bigger chances than during the Soviet period.

Before the collective farms there were entrepreneurs, they looked further into the future.' [Anarbek demonstrates by turning his pen on its head, and then flipping it back again] *'And then this [way of being] was turned around, now it's turned around again.'*¹⁷⁵

As Anarbek's twice-turning pen demonstrates, he sees the first and second revolutions (associated strongly with collectivization and privatization of property) as inversions. Indeed, the post-Soviet area is unique in having experienced two modernist revolutions in the twentieth century, each of which defined itself in direct opposition to the other (Brandtstädter 2007: 133). Just as there are different kinds of tradition to orient towards (the pre-Soviet, the Soviet, mosque - or *mazar* - based religious practice) now there are two kinds of modernity (the 'traditional' Soviet variety) and Yrysbek's experience of Turkey. How to make sense of all these ideals? Let me give the last word on culture to Anarbek:

'Educated people now don't know their roots, they have a Western education. So they have two cultures in their bodies. They have been picked out from their own culture and trained elsewhere. Their body and mind fight with each other. But I'm whole in my body; there is no conflict in my mind. The problem is people fighting in their own mind. We have to force ourselves to overcome this. The West is not from Mars. ... Kyrgyzstan will go its own separate way [jolu bөлökchö]; it will be a combination of features.'

One can interpret this sense of radically different periods succeeding each other as an epochal view of the past: empires come and go, be they Soviet, Mongolian or Kyrgyz. However, a seemingly static comparison of the Soviet era and 'now' actually points to a highly dynamic history of cataclysmic ruptures. The story can thus both be a reassuring one, of steadily becoming more and more cultured, or a frightening one, in which people are

¹⁷⁵ See also chapter 7 on entrepreneurship.

suddenly thrown back -with the flip of a pen- into more ‘traditional’ ways of living.¹⁷⁶ If history behaves a bit like the weather, storms and clear weather arriving and departing, it is no wonder that people like Gulnara don’t feel they can explain why or how the climate changes. Having examined in detail how people talk about the past, the final section of this chapter attends to what people say about the future. Such visions are bound-up with, and throw ideas back on the accounts of history we have dealt with.

What does the Future feel like?

I cut and collect grass

But I am not tired

May my wishes

Concerning my studies come true

I hope newspapers and magazines will be published

I hope I will be happy reading them

I hope my dreams will come true

If I am somehow lucky

Water that turns

Dry land to swamp,

May the wishes of a young person

come true.

Alimkhan Apa sang this song, full of her youthful wishes and hopes for the future, at the age of 90, knowing that some of these dreams had been realised, and that others had failed. As Ferguson’s ethnography of the Zambian Copperbelt shows, nostalgia for a time when a good modern future was attainable, is not restricted to post-Soviet citizens. It seems to appear in the conjunction between failed modernization projects and uncertain and daunting futures, a characteristic of late modernity as such. The everyday difference between Soviet and present modernities in the experience of the people encountered in these pages is primarily a difference of security and prospects for the future. Boym explains the projection

¹⁷⁶ For the debate on veiling practices as modern or traditional in Kyrgyzstan, see McBrien 2009.

of the good life into the past as a reaction to the future narrowing, people seeing their hopes and horizons of aspiration shrinking (Boym 2001: 71). Indeed, people like Liudmilla Fedorovna see the future as lost in the past while Yrysbek has quite a different sense of the future. Undoubtedly this is in part because he is in his thirties, while Liudmilla Fedorovna is a fit pensioner.



Figure 19: Two workers at the Toktogul dam in the 1970s (Anon: n.d.)

Source: National Image Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic

Some people like Aijamal describe thinking about the future as a *new* skill while Anarbek sees it as a re-awakening of pre-Soviet entrepreneurship.¹⁷⁷ Planning is a necessary attribute of entrepreneurship, for example in the sphere of ‘family planning’. Bichsel describes how aid workers in Kyrgyzstan see their countrymen through a ‘development lens’ and blame themselves for the status quo. They identify with what ‘should’ be, see a lack of initiative as a ‘Soviet mentality’ and enthuse about ‘moving forward’. As one of Bichsel’s

¹⁷⁷ On entrepreneurship see also chapter 7 on work

informants noted: *'We really did not think about the future. We just knew that we would have this kind of life. That is why people were not so creative, did not have such great desires to have a better future, dreams of building things'* (Bichsel 2008). Such chastisement of Kyrgyz folk for not planning more, not dreaming enough, are not uncommon. Though certainly not endorsing such views, Bourdieu has spoken of how a *'long-lasting experience of powerlessness and no chances'* leads to a *'lasting disorganization of behaviour and thought linked to the disappearance of any coherent vision of the future. People move between fantasy and surrender'* (Bourdieu 2000: 221).¹⁷⁸ Since we have seen people like Koichubek or Bazarkul feel there is profound 'disorder' and that an experienced teacher like Gulnara feels unable to explain the causes of change, Bourdieu's words ring very true here.

But there are also alternative visions of the future that sit alongside or interact with the idea of development: a popular video circulating in 2008 showed Sagynaali uluu Nurbek, dressed all in white giving an impassioned and graphic account of the terrible things he saw happening to sinners in hell, before he came back from the dead. These sinners were people who used amulets for protection against evil, who drank alcohol and refused to pray. I watched this video with my school-teacher friend Baktygul, while tidying away a meal. We all consume alcohol sometimes, all use amulets. *'Aren't you afraid of hell?'* I asked. *'Sure we're afraid'*, she replied. Like the video warning of hell or asking for blessings at a *mazar*, the plans of Soviet administrators and current international donors point as much to anxieties about the future, as to desires.

The Silence of *Mankurts*?

Does widespread regret for the passing of the Soviet Union imply Central Asians were turned into *mankurts*, as Aitmatov's parable suggests? If an elder like Kadyrbek recounts how good the Russian revolutionaries were for Kyrgyzstan, this is certainly evidence of a powerful narrative. But is it 'brainwashing'? Forgetting past events, particularly the wrongs done to one's people, by or to oneself is considered dangerous and pathological by most European analysts (Antze and Lambek 1996: xix). The strength of this moral stance towards the past stems on the one hand from Freud's theory of repression causing trauma and

¹⁷⁸ This is very similar to the 'culture of poverty' described by Oscar Lewis, and critiqued more recently in Day et.al., who see 'living for the moment' as a potent strategy of survival and resistance among marginal people, though a strategy that can bear heavy costs. (Day et.al. 1999:21).

illness, on the other from the view that horrors such as the Holocaust can only be averted in future by constant mindfulness.¹⁷⁹ However, detecting such ‘silences’ and interpreting them as damaging or a sign of social disease, depends on assumptions of what normal ‘history’ and commemoration is.

My own curiosity was pricked by how little anger I heard about the undoubtedly violent conflicts over collectivization, the ensuing hunger, *dekulakization* and the troubled settlement of property in the post-Soviet period. Unlike the experience of individual deaths, which I found were always marked with an upwelling of emotion, mass death and events like *dekulakization* were touched on more lightly. As the examples here show, elders certainly mentioned these bad times as part of the past, but they were not something to be dwelt on, to be reasoned about or where blame could be attached and redress sought. The same could often be said of the flooding of the Toktogul valley. These tragedies were acknowledged, but not dwelt on. In the mood of weighing up recent past and present against each other, most people seemed to feel the sacrifices of the Soviet era on the road to *kul'tura* were worth it.

We have seen that people were frequently reluctant to name people who sold off communal property. *'Things just disappeared, the big people ate them'*.¹⁸⁰ I have attributed reluctance to lay blame as fear of repercussions, undermining unity, or not wanting to speak ill of the dead. Words are very powerful things, perhaps especially so in a recently literate society.¹⁸¹ On the other hand, commemorating the goodness of kin, as the descendant of Dyikanbai's wife does, is a duty. When the secret location of the mass grave of Kyrgyz Communist leaders who were purged in 1937-8 was revealed, their bodies were given a ceremonial reburial the day before formal independence in 1991.¹⁸²

Nor should one imagine that silence equates willed forgetting or not caring. It is when death becomes unimaginably terrible, incomprehensible - as perhaps in a famine experienced by a child - that talk may not be adequate in any way. In the aftermath of the civil war in Sierra Leone, Michael Jackson has asked what the point of remembering injustice is. Sierra Leoneans do not necessarily feel that remembering helps them live a better life, a life of

¹⁷⁹ For example, Sherlock pointedly argues that unless Russia conducts a campaign of enlightenment about the crimes of past leaders, democracy will never have a strong foot-hold in Russia (Sherlock 2007: 182-185).

¹⁸⁰ In chapter 5, Toktogul Satylganov also sang of Dyikanbai khan: *'You fine and eat the whole people'*.

¹⁸¹ See also chapter 8 on the power of the spoken word as poetry and song to bless and give moral guidance.

¹⁸² See Verdery (1999) for comparable political gestures in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz government is generally keen to maintain cordial relations with Russia and its ethnic Russian citizens, and certainly does not identify Russia as the successor to Soviet injustices.

seeking peace with their neighbours and closure (Jackson 2008:100). Recounting suffering is not necessarily in the victims' interest: *'The inscription of trauma narratives may be a necessary, sufficient, and compelling means of establishing recognition. At the same time, such an identity politics can subjugate and immobilize victims in the very act of recognizing their suffering'* (Antze & Lambek 1996: xxiv). I would like to suggest that likewise, in Bel Aldy, seeking redress from likely neighbours and distant family publicly is calculated to make more trouble than it is worth. Unlike in the era of *glasnost* or post-Maoist China, 'speaking bitterness' is not a speech act that is recognized as effecting positive change (Rofel 1999: 138). Instead 'the big ones': the powerful but safely abstract or demoted are given the blame.

There are possible parallels to Cole's explanation for why the Betsimisaraka people of Madagascar do not speak of the violent uprising against the French in 1948. For Betsimisaraka, remembering (in narrative and ritual) is a way of recognizing the power of ancestors and a way of negotiating with them. It therefore makes no sense to give power to state threats in past and present by remembering them in such a way. Remembered fears are not voiced unless say, elections threaten violence anew (Cole 1998: 625-8). Parallels can be drawn to how Kyrgyz genealogies are remembered or forgotten: in order to foster *birimdik* and *yntymak*, the 'alien' roots of people are not publicly commemorated – until something goes wrong.

When history is highly politicized, as in the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and legitimizing narrative of the Kyrgyz nation-state, public narratives and the things people experience may be disconnected so much that people may not be able to recount their experience.¹⁸³ Merridale's study of memory in contemporary Russia suggests that until *glasnost*, there was no collective acknowledgment that the suffering of gulag victims was unjust, or even that they existed, as a group. Since people who returned were isolated from each other, and as the regime allowed them to re-integrate, silence and getting on with your life was the best option (Merridale 2000: 15-17).¹⁸⁴ There were other strategies: immersing oneself in the immortality of one's labour as a collective therapy, anti-Soviet jokes, drink.

¹⁸³ In the Russian context Oushakine (2000) has described this as 'post-Soviet aphasia'. It should not be forgotten that texts that on the surface speak the language of Communism are open-ended and can be read as much more critical. For an example see Humphrey (1994). Vitebsky has pointed to the emotional consequences of inarticulacy, when e.g. shamanic modes of commemorating and grieving become publicly unacceptable (2008: 256-7).

¹⁸⁴ This is not unlike the experience of Roma who survived Fascist persecutions in Hungary (Stewart 2004).

There were of course groups who could easily remember publicly, such as veterans of the Great Patriotic War (Merridale 2000:213). It is clear from my ethnography that certain people (e.g. elders and *aksakals*) had more authority to tell the past than others, such as *kelins*, who perhaps even viewed themselves as *having* more or less of a story. In either case, ‘having’ history is an achievement, a form of ‘property’ that only exists if recognized by relevant others.

But what of non-verbal commemoration, what of material traces in land such as *mazars* or dams, and feast cycles for dead kin? Certainly other researchers have viewed practices such as spirit possession as non-verbal, ritual ways of remembering in which the power of colonial regimes are redistributed (Stoller 1995, Cole 1998). Ritual represents a hard-to-detect and combat form of everyday resistance (Scott 1985). All these investigations are premised on resisting the idea that colonial powers impose their worldview on their colonial subjects and that subaltern voices are hard to hear.

In Central Asia, claims that non-verbal, perhaps even unconscious ritual is a form of social (collective) memory have been made in the religious domain (Privratsky 2001). As we have seen, there are indeed material and practice-based ways of commemorating kin links in particular, that are certainly separate, if not opposed to the teleology of ‘becoming cultured’ in a Soviet or post-Soviet mode. The commonplace of *sanjira*, epics and stories about ancient people and places do not indicate that *mankurtizm* has wiped out this domain. But how to account for the fact that dangerous and painful memories do not seem to be integrated into these forms of commemoration? I cannot say whether politically ‘dangerous’ relatives, were or are sometimes suppressed in *sanjira*. But in principle the *sanjira*, through its very ‘dryness’ and principle of accounting for every male link in the line, makes it possible to give honour to people denigrated or unmentionable in other registers.

That different modes of dealing with the future (development, heaven and hell, a big question mark, ‘transition’), just like different modes of commemorating the past can co-exist is evidence of the fact that, the imagination is not a realm like a country, that you can fill up with an army, as Sneath puts it (2009: 88). Visions of the afterlife, of becoming as modern as Moscow, of heroes leaving their mark under poplar trees, and of the Kyrgyz as rulers of a once-great empire that may rise again, can all run along next to each other.

Conclusion to Section II: What is Commemorating for?

In describing the kind of relationships people create between past, present and future, the following observation by Latour seems apposite: '*Time is not a general framework, but a provisional result of the connection among entities.*' He goes on to say that people are '*exchangers and brewers of time*', mixing times such as the 'modern' and 'traditional' in all sorts of ways (Latour 1993: 75). It bears reiterating that disentangling the different rhythms of relating to past and present, naming different sorts of rhythms is the analyst's purpose, and not that of people living in the midst of them. I began this chapter by discussing continuities and then moved on to concerns with change. This is the classic model of modern historiography, closely allied to viewing the (more remote) past as static, and the recent past and future as dynamic. I will disturb this pattern a little here by starting with the future, change, and working backward, just as most historical questioning does.

The scraps of stories in these pages, how Nurakun arrived in the Soviet army, how Nargiza got her little girl, how Yrysbek stopped drinking or how Bazarkul rebuilt his family's wealth, do not add up to a single narrative. This is hardly surprising, since people's lives, and the stories they decide to tell of them, are subject to both different fortunes and individuals' decisions. However, as I have shown, these narratives, like life choices, all relate to a wider social repertoire of available stories that people draw on: they may insert themselves as a hero protecting or aiding others, as taking part in building the future collectively, or as a bystander who deflects responsibility and the possibility of blame. These can be described, as I did in chapters 2-4 as different economies (or ecologies) of knowledge. We have seen the strength of Fabian's 'typological time' in both the ideas of academics and people living this period: Socialism and post-Socialism, post-colonialism, revolutions, modernities and traditions. I add to these frames the *sanjira*, the eternity of the epic and *jailoo*. In both the words of our informants, and in consequence in much of our scholarship, the Soviet Union appears in guises such as 'tradition', 'the cause' and a 'lost civilization'. This also makes Soviet life appear distant, a remote other. The Soviet past could appear as a 'second tradition' as well as a 'second modernity'.

My interlocutors presented a relatively 'flat' view of the Soviet past because they needed to simplify and contrast the past and present for an outsider. The high degree of contrast is likely also a result of the fact that humans are aware of and speak of difference

more easily than of the taken-for-granted (Ankersmit 2001: 317). But the flatness of both past and future may also be a consequence of the reception of Socialist, modernist ideology.

For those who lived it, the Soviet Union presents the measure of the present: in moral evaluation of good and bad, it seems '*in 1970 it was good, in 1980 it was bad*' is not a fit conclusion. I have shown that 'nostalgia' is not the one-dimensional wanting-things-back-the-way-they-were that it is sometimes assumed to be. Nostalgia is a common human mood; in the post-Soviet region, for the reasons mentioned above, it has become a strong mood in public discourse too. This particular type of nostalgia is a kind of critique of the present, a present that never seems to promise certainty or avenues of aspirations that are acceptably modern. People feel on the one hand that they must re-learn planning for the future, on the other they feel robbed of a comfortable future, the promise Communism held. If people think in terms of aspiring to modernity, then the fall of the Soviet model of modernity and path to a positive future in which 'the people' were told they were the main players, in which most were integrated (through schooling, work and party activities), must be a trauma of purpose and hope as well as crisis in standards of living.

While approving accounts refer mostly to the later Socialist period, people like Nurakun Ata compare 'now' with more searing memories of the earlier Bolshevik and Stalinist phase. Nevertheless, Nurakun does not use history as a warning of certain actions or consequences, even while he wishes '*may people not experience what we experienced!*' The recent past does not tell many lessons, though Manas is thought to do so (perhaps more in the abstract principle than in everyday practice).

The nostalgic mood induces a sense of epochs and sudden shifts, which tessellate with a longer view of Central Asian history, of empires and ruins. If people like Gulnara or Azimkul conceive of certain leaders as steering history, this makes history erratic and unpredictable. It also problematizes the articulation of personal lives and grand narratives, as well as keeping 'small people' as opposed to 'big people', free of guilt.

A sense of a seamless link with the past, of constancy is established through the idea of *sanjira* and the kinship practices associated with it. In this sense of embodying history, the Kyrgyz I spoke might say: you would not *be* without your ancestors. As *blood* and someone who commemorates forebears, you are everything that has been learnt and retained. It is partly this kind of awareness - '*without an uruu, there would be no people*' - that motivates people to commemorate their dead, the anonymous, beloved and admirable. The well-known literary figure of the *mankurt* also warns that not being able to commemorate forebears makes

one vulnerable to manipulation by others. This is not to say descent and epic are the only modes of elaborating continuity: the frame of the nation-state, continuing Soviet dam-building, museums to the founders of Kyrgyz *kul'tura* all imply contemporary Kyrgyz as the heirs of greatness. Despite the discourse on *tuulgan jer* and the valuation of patrilineal descent, from which the ambivalent situation of women in virilocal marriages derives, I would not go so far as to describe land *per se* as an aspect of kinship.

Like in Battaglia's ethnography of the Melanesian Sabarl people, the most important form of commemorating ancestors is a series of memorial feasts for the recently dead (Battaglia 1990:10). Unlike the Sabarl, who distrust narrative commemoration, I think in Kyrgyzstan words are considered particularly effective. It is for this reason that people are careful to make principled demands for how things should be, based on historical precedent (in traditions 1 or 2) but remove the responsibility of individuals from these, unless these are complimentary, heroic deeds.

And what of the past experiences people preferred to keep quiet? As we have seen, these silences exist both in terms of sliding over imperfect family lineages, and in publicly 'forgetting' (not commemorating) individual blame. If there were powerful 'others' from which resources could be reclaimed, as in the case of deported Tatar Crimeans squatting in their former homes, this situation might look different (cf. Uehling 2004).

In Aitmatov's novel '*The Day lasts a hundred years*', the protagonist takes pains to take his dead friend to the ancestral cemetery, only to find that he can no longer bury him there, because the area has been taken over by the Soviet space program. The state has decided that the future is worth more than the past.¹⁸⁵ The modern aesthetic works here both in the temporal and spatial dimension. Indeed, as David Harvey makes clear, the invention of neutral time and space makes them comparable, exchangeable and sellable (Harvey 1996: 253). Ssorin-Chaikov argues that the objects in the exhibition of Stalin's 70th birthday are representations of time, and that they harbour at once competing and interdependent notions of time. There was both a big rush to get these presents made for a certain date, but they were also supposed to have eternal validity. The exhibition made the world both a scene of Socialist struggle and co-evally, a scene of victory (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006:368).

I have argued here though, that certain objects such as the Toktogul dam are *predominantly* timed as 'Soviet', and that their contemporary relevance derives from their

¹⁸⁵ There are curious parallels to Tarkovsky's 1979 sci-fi movie 'Stalker' here, where the zone can also be read as the forbidden West.

continuity with Soviet time. *Jailoos* on the other hand derive much of their authority from being timeless – like Manas. It is not coincidental that both are identified as pre-eminently (ethnic and national) Kyrgyz tropes. A modern aesthetic introduces the idea of *remoteness*, which is always in relation to a centre – or a future. Lines of continuity and revolution can thus be drawn in a tiered landscape, where Soviet era and current hydroelectric projects embody two versions of modernity (one a future stopped in its tracks, which the second has taken over), pass through semi-modern, semi-planned and educated villages that people like Nargiza and Bazarkul live in, toward the eternally traditional, and eternally reliable (in terms of economic survival) mountain pastures. It is curious that the new nation-state seems to want to partake of modernist building projects and *jailoo* life, but does not highlight Aijamal's village in its own image, though this is the kind of life experience that most citizens have in common. This seems to recall a Soviet view of time, where one is either of the past or of the future, but never just of the present (Grant 1995: 158).

We have seen that places are frequently used to index relationships between individuals and groups of people. This index often assumes the isomorphism between people, levels of culture and places (Turton 2004:9). So *remoteness* can index wisdom and ignorance, 'central-ness' knowledge and decadence (Diment and Slezkine 1993: 4). This hierarchical view of places is intimately bound up with a centralized, rather than federal, model of the state, and of power. Hence the Russian, then Soviet practice of using boarding schools to bring minorities into the Soviet fold of culture, hence the use of exile as a punishment for people like the future ethnographers of the Kyrgyz, Saul Abramzon and Klavdia Antipina. Hence the territorial boundary- and entitlement-making practices I described in this chapter.

Much of the literature on memory in the post-Soviet area implies that movement, physical distance from earlier lives endangers memory, encourages forgetting (Brown 2004, Uehling 2004). Indeed, Brown contends that Soviet strategies of resettlement were premised on this assumption (Brown 2004: 82). But people whose way of life was once based on seasonal transhumance, who see historic kinship relations with Saxons and Germans as entirely possible, may not agree on this point. As we have seen in the case of Anarbek the livestock technician, Yrysbek or the 19th century headman who introduced 'proper' Islam to a remote village, it is possible to derive personal authority from the experience of locations thought 'advanced' in comparison to remote pastoralists. It is possible that even Nargiza, landing unwillingly in a muddier street than she grew up on, takes her confidence and authority in her in-laws household from the fact that she was once an educated city girl,

though in practical terms her education is of little use to her in hay-making. As I demonstrated, certainly on the level of individual authority, movement to and from an authoritative place can be a source of personal status.

Just as elements of the landscape telling of Soviet ruin (abandoned storage depots and neglected irrigation channels) or elements of ‘becoming cultured’ can be picked out, these co-exist with the *mazar* where the giant Saigan threw his hoe, and which continues to heal in the present. Such event-based stories also co-exist with an idea of an eternal tradition: that of the kind of pastoralism encountered on pastures and in epics like *Manas*, which are also appropriated by the modern nation-state. It is these forms of remote past, continuity and assumed eternal validity that contrast so starkly with recent ascendance in becoming *kul’turnii* and even more recent setbacks and efforts at ‘development’. Mixing these modes is evident in people’s sense of appropriate behaviour and range of choices, for example in Aijamal’s clothes: at home with her in-laws, she wears a modest and practical *khalat* (house gown) and headscarf. Working as a teacher she dresses in high-heels, stockings and a smart two-piece. Efforts to integrate kinds of eternity (tradition) in the trajectory of development and projections of the future include continuing Soviet dam-building projects, the self-realization of a nation, also through *Kyrgyzchylyk*, and claims of the ‘sustainability’ and eco-mindedness of ancient pastoralists. Though using history in a moralizing and comparative vein can look like a linear narrative, there are also the lived, counter-linear paradoxes of needing ultramodern 4x4s to deal with deteriorating roads, and mobiles where there is no landline. As one might guess, if the European model of civilization is indeed influential, the urban ideal calls forth criticism of ‘decadence’ too. A recent blockbuster Kyrgyz film, ‘Love of a Minister's Daughter’, tells the story of a spoilt rich girl (smoking, drinking, wearing skimpy clothes, a lazy student) being saved by her naive village cousin, a karate ace (Atashov 2006). As we will see in the chapter on work, the parallel schemes of being cultured in the ‘international’ mode or ‘national’ Kyrgyz mode is part of the reason pastoral ways of life hold such a central, and yet ambiguous place.

Ingold argues for seeing landscape as process, as a ‘collapsed act’ and enduring record of people dwelling in it (Ingold 2000: 198). However, this does not tell us anything about whether people view their surroundings with an eye to continuity, seek out the details of transformation, or how and why they might combine these practices. As the tiered landscape described above demonstrates, the landscape is in fact not one thing, to be measured by one set of criteria, but timed through many different, jostling stories.

Section III: Working and Enjoying Places

Chapter 7: What is Work and why do it?

It is August 2006 and we are on a *jailoo* at 2000 metres. I am staying with Anvar and Elmira, their three young children and a hired shepherd. After lunch the sky turns grey, and strong chill gusts sweep the wide valley. It looks like rain and there is not much fuel left, so we each grab a woven polythene sack and scour the surrounding pasture for dry cow pats. We've been going out regularly to lay out good cow pats to dry on the granite boulders that litter the meadows. As the first drops fall, we hurry to check if they have dried by now, and gather them into our sacks. But they are not enough: who knows how long the rain will last: an hour, a week? I check dung still strewn on the meadows for dryness by kicking the cow pat with my rubber shoes. Sometimes I misjudge the pat, and get green slime on my shoe. It is satisfying to find a really solid, light cow pat. It is less fun scrounging the ground for small bits of broken cow pats, or where the dung has mixed with horse manure, which is useless as fuel. As my sack gets heavier, lugging it becomes more difficult. It is tempting to drag it instead, but that would soon mean many holes in a precious sack. As I dump another armful of dung, my hostess Elmira remarks wryly: 'this is our life: collecting shit' (*bul bizdin jashoo: biz bok terebiz*). I hear bitterness in her comment and resignation. But we also laugh. I only realize later what a rude word she used.

Nonetheless, Elmira and Anvar are impatient to move out of their house in the valley by March, eager to set up the *boz üü* next to the roaring snowmelt and among thick carpets of purple and orange flowers. Their ambivalence intrigued me: what was it that was so demeaning about pastoral work, and what valuable? I partially answered this question in discussing the strong attachment to *jailoos* felt by people like Saikal Apa in chapter 2. However, it is worth returning to *jailoos* and hydroelectric dams, to rethink them as places associated with certain kinds of work.

During my fieldwork I was surrounded by talk about very different kinds of work: discussions of the mayor's failure to '*do anything for us, with the salary he gets*', approving comments on a young man assisting his mother on the summer pastures, murmurs on the kind of festive meal a neighbour had offered. Elsewhere people said they had been 'working', earning money by attending rallies and demonstrations during the Tulip Revolution in 2005 (Ismailbekova forthcoming).

It may seem a surprising move to classify all these different fields of activity as 'work'. Surely they could also be discussed as 'leadership', 'kinship obligations' or 'hospitality'? In fact, I would like to follow Kyrgyz ideas in making the opposite move, of admitting all these activities under the umbrella 'work', which in Europe might be more immediately understood as wage labour. Why does Elmira tell me she is unemployed, when she puts in 16-hour workdays? What do people mean when they tell me 'everyone works for themselves now' (*öz özüchün*)? Why do I so often encounter the opinion that people are poor because they are lazy? Or, to sum up these conundrums, what kind of work do people do, what does it mean to them and how do these activities relate to places like the *jailoo*, the dam and sites of migrant labour abroad? My interlocutors did not always agree on the nature and value of work: what it was and what it was for. As the following ethnography will show, there are strong differences in the expectations associated with men and women, social roles and experiences in making a living and trying to get by. Since the Soviet empire that upheld socialist labour as the road to a utopian future collapsed, new ways of doing and understanding ways of work have emerged, such as '*each to their own*'.

My fascination with work was not only motivated by the questions my fieldwork raised: what work is about is a question of personal purpose, and one that surfaces with great force both in current politics, and in sociological literature. The issue of work was raised at the intersection of my European life experience, and that of my Kyrgyz interlocutors. We all seemed to reflect on the place of work in our lives, to compare and imagine other working lives, to judge our own and others' performance as workers. The purpose of this chapter is to explore our differing histories of work and the resulting differences in how we understood the nature and aims of work. What conditions, values and practices affect people's wishes and choices and the place they give 'work' in their lives? I deal with moral geographies here from the point of view of working lives: in what sense do places create different kinds of work, and different kinds of persons? In how far does the separation of work and enjoyment - which I have institutionalized in the arrangement of my thesis - as distinct spheres of life hold? Some of my labour history is revealed in the literature I review, for example in the idea of the Protestant work ethic or the association of work-free time and not incidentally, 'wide-open' spaces and freedom.

I argue that the prominence of the discourse about work and its value is a result of converging ideas from different sources: expectations according to gender and seniority of service in the kinship economy, Islam, socialist ideals and neo-liberal ideals of

entrepreneurship. To do so I discuss the working lives of pastoralists, young housewives, Muslim clerics, farmer entrepreneurs, Communist Party functionaries and hydroelectric engineers. I found people often took the late Soviet period as their point of comparison in talking about work. Although there are many continuities, I argue that overall, it is not only the institutional context of work that has changed, but the *nature* of work itself, the nature of practical activities, purposes and achievements that are or derive from work. Within this overarching, metamorphosing idea, there are areas where the content of work has changed radically, and others where less overt transformation is palpable.¹⁸⁶

It is likely that my interlocutors were particularly insistent on the value of work for two reasons: on the one hand I belong to the group of people who are expected to work particularly hard in Kyrgyz society, namely young women. On the other hand, I come from a capitalist country, and people tended to have strong ideas on what European working lives were like. I was also more likely to hear about the value of work from those who took pride in it, rather than those stigmatized as layabouts. As a foreign woman away from her husband I was a little anxious about my reputation and so I did not spend much time hanging out by the roadside with people (mostly young men and boys) enjoying a drink and game of cards. However, social distances in my field site were not large, and there were plenty of relatives, neighbours and acquaintances, including my own host mother, who somehow did not live up to certain local standards of work.

A word of caution: the ethnography below could easily lead to the impression that the people I met were constantly rushing around, performing 'busyness' as they went about their lives. This is not the case. On the contrary, doing your job properly can imply a lot of just being there, staying at home or sitting together. But how do you write about someone having a nap, watching TV, idly sitting on the porch watching the children, having an extended meal or endless cups of tea? This imbalance will be redressed to some extent in chapter 8, when I discuss ways of enjoying life. The conclusion of this chapter should also guard against the assumption often made that labour activity must be disagreeable, and that having nothing to do is wonderful.

¹⁸⁶ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers from the journal 'Ethnography' for their helpful feedback on this material.



Figure 20: Sewing together new felts for a boz üi

A Broad Definition of Work

What counts as work in the Toktogul valley? When I went to write up my field notes, make plans or learn Kyrgyz at home, my host mother would often nod and say, '*yes, you go and have a rest*'. I was mildly annoyed by her casual dismissal of my activities as valuable work, and since work was so highly valued both in my background and current context, wondered whether my social *raison d'être* was being questioned. I am still not sure. But this discomfort leads us into a discussion of what counts as work in the lives of my Kyrgyz interlocutors. I will give linguistic definitions of work in Kyrgyzstan, but will only fill these words with content further in the course of the chapter, in order to reveal a succinct notion of Kyrgyz work in the conclusion. But first let me turn to some answers to the question 'what is work?' from the social science literature.

It has been said that all social science is a dialogue with the ghost of Marx (Rosaldo 1983: 20). I think in the case of work, this is true.¹⁸⁷ However, there is a distinct difference in emphasis between the sociology and anthropology of work: the former has engaged far more explicitly with the question of work. Labour markets, unions, the question of alienation, the power dynamics and distribution of different occupational sectors along lines of gender, age, race and ethnicity are staples of sociology. Very broadly, sociological studies tend to conceive of work as wage labour and housework (compare Grint 2005).

Though unlike in sociology, work is not a staple subject of anthropology, anthropologists of the post-socialist region have frequently studied 'workers' (Ashwin 1999, Burawoy 1985, Hann 2003, Humphrey 1998, Kideckel 2008, Kotkin 1997, Lampland 1995, Nam 2007, Rofel 1999). This is not surprising, since the Soviet Union was supposed to be a workers' state and the 'transition' promised new relationships between state and worker, private and public work. What I want to do here is not an ethnography of 'workers' as a group or social class, but to discuss work as an activity, whether wage-generating or not, that most everybody is involved in.

Much of anthropologists' writing on work is in fact sequestered in literature that does not bear the stamp of 'labour'. This is because anthropologists, following their informants' categories, tend to a much wider view of work than wage labour and include activities that may not earn cash but are nonetheless productive or reproductive.¹⁸⁸ One pillar of the anthropology of work are the experiences of labour migrants, though here the experience of dislocation, demeaning labour and culture clash often takes precedence over the experience of work as such.¹⁸⁹ Another set of ethnographies deal with 'small people's' work practices, where work appears more as a way of life than a section of life, for example in the work of Anderson (2000) and Vitebsky (2005) in the post-Soviet area, or Elizabeth Povinelli on aboriginal Australians (1993).

The meanings of the old English word 'work', both as a noun and verb are surprisingly varied. They range from simply referring to an action, a deed and task to an occupation,

¹⁸⁷ One question I have not resolved for myself is in how far my Kyrgyz and Russian interlocutors are also talking with or to Marx when they tell me about their working lives.

¹⁸⁸ See for example Malinowski 2002 [1935], Sahlins 1972 and Tsing 1993. In Central Asia there has also been some interest in crafts (Bunn 2000, Dağyeli 2008).

¹⁸⁹ On industrial labour see Burawoy 1985, Nash 1993 and Ong 1987. On collective farming see Lampland 1995, Humphrey 1998, Humphrey 2002a and Hann 2003. On migrant labour see Reeves 2007, Werbner 2002, Pilkington 1998 and Glick-Schiller 1999.

employment or business. 'Work' often implies some '*effort or exertion directed to a definite end, especially as a means of gaining one's livelihood.*' But it also designates the products of work, an accomplishment such as a work of art. In the context of physics, work is the '*operation of a force in producing movement or other physical change.*' Labour is rather more specific, it denotes the '*exertion of the faculties of the body or mind, especially when painful or compulsory; bodily or mental toil*' (OED).

It is immediately apparent that the wide scope of the 'work' term also throws up great discrepancies and ambiguities for the theorist of work. If we take an English physicist's view, then even plants work. Yet to our ears it sounds absurd to say that they 'labour' or that they are a product of work. And if work in one sense simply means action, can a pensioner or school-child be 'at work'? They will certainly be engaged in goal-orientated activity, but they are not exactly gaining their livelihood.

In both Marxian terms and on the terms of European ruling classes until the late modern period, work was an attribute of the poor. This rather negative opinion of work also dominated in the ancient Greek polis, where only a person who did not depend on work for a living could fully participate as a citizen (Harris 2007: 157). Several ethnographers of work have reacted against the strict Marxist definition of labour as the capacity to transform nature and against the focus on producing material goods in Marx's critique of capitalism. According to Marx's theory of *capitalist* labour, work is the unit of time you sell to those possessing the means of production in return for a wage. This then means workers divert their ability to create into the aims and products of others (capitalists), as a way of meeting basic survival needs.¹⁹⁰

According to Olivia Harris, Aymara people in Bolivia use the Spanish word *trabajo* to describe all of the following: to stretch the hands in many directions, to work in two fields in a single day or to work as a strong man without feeling tired. The archetypal *trabajo* is ploughing, which demonstrates the very desirable quality of endurance. To Aymara farmers, writing fieldnotes is definitely not manual labour, so it is not *trabajo* (Harris 2007: 140). But there are other ways of describing work that might fit this activity: making something such as a beautiful cloth has nothing to do with endurance, but is nonetheless evidence of the maker's vitality and industriousness. Products of such work are always for someone or for a collective

¹⁹⁰ 'By labour-power or capacity for labour is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description' (Marx 1988 [1867] Vol.1: 167).

event. Harris points out that to Aymara, collective agricultural labour is both a virtue *and* a burden, and that the obligation to work is not the same as coercion. She notes that most theories of value focus on the *things* that work produces, but in the Aymara case, the process of work itself is an expression of value (Harris 2007: 146-9).

Harris describes human motivations to work as firstly the need to live, to satisfy bodily needs, secondly the need to live well and thirdly the need to be properly human (Harris 2007:137). Here, the value of work is both intrinsic and graspable in its products (which is quite different from their market value). In fact, Marx's initial definition of work as conscious and deliberate action is very close to what Harris describes. However, because Marx spoke most of the time about alienated, capitalist forms of work ('labour'), the creative and social aspects of action often recede in his vision, becoming a sorely missed attribute of work rather than an inherent property of human activity and the 'whole man'. However, even exploited labourers can find meanings other than basic survival needs in their work. Nash points out that Bolivian miners' damaging and ill-recompensed work is a source of excitement, pride, brotherhood and ethical relations:

'When I asked one miner what fears he had when he entered the mine he said:
"I don't have any fears. I was born to be a miner! I like the mine. I like the excitement of putting myself in danger to prove my manhood and my capacity. I like it when, after working hard and sweating, I throw water on my head and feel the coolness and I imagine all sorts of power in me. I like the comradeship. I believe we all ought to live like brothers in a family, the way we workers feel inside the mine" '(Nash 1993: 10-12).

Although this man did not want his children to go down the mines, the value of work to him lay both in itself *and* in its products. The following ethnography will show in how far Marx' (or rather, his inheritors') ideas on the content of work, its value and measure resonate with Kyrgyz work practices and discourse around work and where they diverge.

We have seen that English uses the word 'work' in polysemous ways. Do Kyrgyz and Russian have an equally complex idea of work? A cluster of words are used for 'work' in Kyrgyz: the word *ish* ('work') is both a noun and a verb. *Ish* can be your affairs and activities, so you may be out on *ish* when you are dealing with some family dispute. You can also say '*anyn bashy ishteit*' ('his/her head works') to say someone is clever, their brain functions well.

Someone who is *ishterman* is industrious or diligent, while an *ishmer* is an active person, a master of his craft or statesman. Words that are used in a very similar way to *ish* are *jumush* or the Russian *rabota*.¹⁹¹ Words that imply a more industrial or wage-labour related sense of work are the Russian *trud* and Kyrgyz *emgek*. An *emgekchi* is a worker in socialist literature. Linguistically then, *ish* and *jumush* are not far apart from the cluster of meanings of 'work' in English. Yet, the history of labour and current social activities in Kyrgyzstan point to different layers of meaning in 'work', which I shall unearth in concrete ethnographic examples.

A Recent History of Work in Kyrgyzstan

Remember Elmira, collecting dung for fuel on the *jailoo* and her comment that '*this is our life: collecting shit*'. Her day starts at dawn: milking ten cows, processing their milk into cream and yoghurt, then milking the mares and beating the milk in a goat-skin sack for fermentation. After that it is time to make a fire, boil tea and prepare breakfast, to wash up, and to keep milking the mares every few hours during the day. Her toddlers need attention too, as does the washing, the afternoon meal, the fuel provision and our water supply from the nearest spring. Just sharing Elmira's chores for half a day exhausts me.

While Elmira moves seamlessly around the *boz üi* from one task to the next, her husband Anvar is lucky enough to have a paid shepherd guard the flock during the day. So he helps Elmira tie down the cattle and mares for milking, puts his hand to chopping vegetables for dinner, or turning the centrifuge to make cream. He also gets our food supplies from town once a month or so, and goes on condolence visits when necessary. He says their roles will be reversed when Elmira can sit in the warm house in winter with the children, and he has to go out and care for the livestock in the cold: shovelling snow, helping sheep give birth, treating wounds and providing fodder. But for now I borrow some detective novels for Anvar in town, to alleviate his boredom.

¹⁹¹ Russian is widely used in urban areas, sometimes replacing Kyrgyz as a first language.



Figure 21: My host sisters stabling sheep as the first snow falls

Despite Elmira's busyness, she tells me she has 'no work', she is '*bezrabortnaia*': unemployed. '*The government won't do anything for people like me*', she says. The contradiction of being very busy making a living and yet describing oneself as unemployed is not uncommon in Central Asia. 'Unemployment' is a new official category in the post-Soviet situation, referring to the absence of formal employment, a wage, pension and most other social entitlements linked to employment in the Soviet era. A large proportion of those pushed out of formal employment and into the informal economy since 1991 have been women (Kandiyoti 1999: 9-10). According to censuses of the late Soviet period, between 60 and 80% of the working-age population of Central Asia were employed in the state sector, tendency rising.¹⁹² However, the higher estimates include overmanning of enterprises, seasonal work and chronic absentees. Since the 60s the problem of 'labour surplus' (i.e. threatening unemployment) in Central Asia was a worry, if not officially acknowledged by the Soviet leadership until 1981 (Lubin 1984:58, 70-1) Certainly many Uzbek women found

¹⁹² These figures are from Uzbekistan, Lubin draws conclusions from these about Central Asia in general.

it difficult to find employment and worked from home, raising their children and tending private plots (Lubin 1984: 68).¹⁹³

In the Soviet era, not having your work book (*rabochaia kniga*) registered with an employer excluded you from citizenship rights and social entitlements that were distributed through the workplace, such as child care, social clubs and holidays. Recall that Nurakun Ata, from a *kulak* family, *always* carried his work book with him. By the 1960s, all areas of life had a *kolektif* so any enterprise was as much a community as a workplace: the place one might gain recognition by mention on the honours board outside the office, and where one might legitimately socialize (Ashwin 1999: 10-11). The 1936 constitution enshrined the principle '*from each according to his ability, to each according to his work.*' The Communist state celebrated the idea that work- particularly unpleasant and physical work- was inherently meaningful and noble. Labour as a means of creating a proper *Homo Sovieticus* was notoriously also used in Gulag camps (Hoffmann 2003:30).

Formal employment and volunteering for state projects legitimated you as a good citizen and conferred rights: it was the only legitimate use of your life-span between education and pension.¹⁹⁴ Work, understood as wage labour for the state, was a political act and act of personal becoming, led by the example of Stakhanovites. '*For a soviet worker, reporting on one's work history became an important ritual in defining oneself before others, and among the most important details of one's work history was the time and place of one's original work experience*' (Kotkin 1997: 215-6).¹⁹⁵ Thus, many adults were 'civil servants' of sorts, a specialist cog in the great lop-sided machine of centralized planning, be it as a kindergarten cook, tractor driver, milk maid or artist. These types of work provided a common basic security and common involvement in a grand plan: the state project of

¹⁹³ Lubin seems to assume that all these women wanted paid work outside the home. I am not so sure.

¹⁹⁴ Can we compare this conjunction of feeling about work with anything like Weber's Protestant work ethic? In some sense the Socialist work ethic appears surprisingly similar, in the sense of deferring enjoyment of the fruits of one's labours to another world (the Communist future), in the sense of work as service (to differing entities though, God on the one hand, the People on the other), and perhaps even in the sense of those who work being the 'elect' who deserve what material goods are given to them (compare Weber 1978: 140-2). However, there are also serious differences in what the Protestants Weber talks about expected: *personal* benefit in a non-metaphorical new world, while Socialist workers were expected to sacrifice their effort for the common good. There are also large conceptual differences between serving God or the People.

¹⁹⁵ Recall the moving work biographies of men in chapter 5.

building Socialism.¹⁹⁶

The hierarchy of labour between republics distributed work regionally and locally, making the Kyrgyz Republic primarily an exporter of wool, meat and minerals. Until the 1970s, it was common for the most highly educated workers to be sent from metropolitan Russia to economically and ideologically 'less advanced' Central Asian republics. Recall that the film 'The Embellishment of the Naryn' showed mostly Russian engineers working on the GES, that Liudmilla Fedorovna was sent as a teacher to Central Asia and that moving people around was a strategy for making *Homo Sovieticus*. From the 70s, the policy of 'rooting' (*korenisatsiia*) brought more (Russian-speaking) ethnic Central Asians into leadership and highly skilled jobs (Lubin 1984:15).

In chapter three I emphasized the dam as an arena of work that brought '*lights to the yurts*' and cultivation to the workers' city of Kara Kul. I also argued that building the dam was viewed as an act of subjecting nature in the spirit of international solidarity. Even the river itself was commanded to '*serve the people*'. We have here a conception of work that is closely aligned with the capacity to transform nature, as production and as political action benefiting all.

However, the benefits of Socialist work and degrees of dependency were not equally distributed, but conferred according to criteria of authoritative knowledge such as Party membership and formal education for high status specialists such as tractor drivers, economists, engineers, doctors, teachers and artists. During the Soviet period, access to scarce goods or services was primarily mediated through personal connections, of which one's profession was often the source. At the moment of privatisation in the mid-90s, being in the loop of information was crucial in enabling the farm management to secure farm property for themselves. For example, it was clear to accountants and farm directors that they would not have to give back or pay for their share of livestock, fears which held many people back from claiming their entitlements.

Socialist ideas of labour inherited an industrial idea of work in terms of *time* given to an enterprise. Certainly the Soviet state gave wages according to time-investment and celebrated the completion of public works such as dams in record time. Thompson (following

¹⁹⁶ The reader may recall Alimkhan's song on cutting grass, making swamp into dry land and reading newspapers in chapter 6. Rofel speaks of this celebration of 'freedom to labour', particularly for formerly secluded women, in the Chinese context as a measure of human worth and source of socialist subjectivity (Rofel 1999: 75-6).

Marx) has famously taken the view that through industrialization, former English peasant ways of working according to the task at hand, with bursts of intense activity interspersed with rest, gave way to mechanical forms of work which alienate the worker by defining work as a fixed period (giving the employer your time) rather than a task.¹⁹⁷ The fact that many Soviet managers had to resort to carrots and sticks in order to make workers not only come to work but also *produce* something suggests that there was a great deal of this kind of alienation. Workers did not always have a clear-cut interest in producing as much as possible, *while at the same time* they might well be proud of being *workers* in a workers' state.¹⁹⁸ Clearly even in a relatively homogenous 'job market', as elsewhere, degrees and qualities in motivations to work, whether for ideals or material benefits, varied widely.

Collective Farm Work

The Socialist idea of work was modelled on the factory worker, the vanguard of the revolution, a vanguard with a martial ethos. In chapter 6 I discussed how peasants and herders were supposed to become *kul'turnii*, class-conscious rural 'workers'. This entailed creating working and living conditions that reflected factory norms: a Taylorian division of labour and from the 1960s, increased mechanization and acquiring the same benefits as urban workers, e.g. pensions. However, *kolkhozniki* largely retained a distinctive status, on the one hand having the opportunity for legal petty trade with produce from private plots, on the other hand finding it difficult to change jobs or receive permission to travel (Humphrey 1998: 4, Fitzpatrick 1994: 96).

The *kolkhoz* or *sovkhos* became increasingly stratified, grouping white collar workers like the chairman and accountant, the skilled, 'modern' blue-colour workers like tractor drivers and blacksmiths and what Fitzpatrick calls the 'lumpen' fieldworkers (Fitzpatrick 1994: 139-141). I found people who had worked in white and blue-collar jobs in the Soviet era were much quicker to let me know about their work than others. Since *kolkhozniki* often lived better off their private plots than off what the *kolkhoz* could pay in kind or wages, and since later their basic *kolkhoz* benefits did not depend strictly on their personal

¹⁹⁷ Ingold disputes this, arguing that industrial society requires a dialectical relation between dwelling (task-time) and a commodity perspective (clock-time), which requires great skill of co-ordination from any worker (Ingold 1995:20).

¹⁹⁸ Since these carrots and sticks were always offered by the state in the last instance, this was where the struggle took place, rather than with the enterprise as such (Burawoy 1985: 195-6).

productivity, labour in the *kolkhoz* was often scarce (Humphrey 1998: 316). Hence the enlistment of ‘youth brigades’, well remembered in Toktogul.¹⁹⁹

This is also true of *kolkhozes* which were integrated in state 5- year plans, dependent on a centralized supply and distribution system and part of a hierarchy of work. In the Soviet era, state plans were oriented to production targets: the aim was always to maximise surplus extraction, with a focus on quantity rather than quality.²⁰⁰ Sultanalý remembers composing the following song to celebrate a good worker:

*‘God blessed [them], there was no obstacle,
old man Borbo is a renowned shepherd.
He added rams of German stock, his sheep give birth to twins,
He even over-fulfilled his plan.
Borbo is being given 38 sheep as a prize.’*

In this *sovkhos* as elsewhere, the pressure to meet quotas could translate into producing credible figures on paper, rather than actual goods. In Kyrgyz livestock breeding this process was known as making ‘breeze lambs’ (*jel kozular*), kilos of live meat that flitted on and off the pages of the ledger, but never materialized on the meadows.²⁰¹ Producing meat, wool and children seemed a patriotic service akin to that of a soldier. These were contributions to the whole. When Liudmilla Fedorovna tells me that ‘*everyone works for themselves now*’, she is not only referring to the loss of a livelihood based on working in brigades and on collective projects, whether on the farm, the school or the dam, but also to the disruption of the meaning of work: building Socialism. This atomisation of meaning and livelihoods is felt as a double crisis. And it is also a crisis in what people see as achievable together: the glories of taming the rivers of Central Asia has given way in many places to quarrels over who should repair the leaking irrigation channels.

But not everyone was happy with the kind of reward they received (and still receive) in state employment. Gulnara, a long-serving teacher commented: ‘*I received all sorts of medals for being a good teacher. But nothing is paid for those awards. The awards sit there*

¹⁹⁹ The use of unpaid young labour continues on a large scale during the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan, where university students and staff are drafted for many weeks, for a tiny compensation.

²⁰⁰ I have reviewed the effect of this orientation on pastures and pastoral knowledge in chapter 2.

²⁰¹ Such strategies came to light on a massive scale during *glasnost*, with the Uzbek ‘cotton scandal’.

on the chest. There is no policy to pay more to good teachers.' To others, like Liudmilla Fedorovna, *bringing lights to the yurts* was a labour of love, to be celebrated in her poetry and museum: the sacrifice itself seemed enough of a reward.

Current Work Patterns

Soviet work patterns and expectations form Elmira's knowledge about what work used to be like for her parents' generation. Elmira's comment that '*the state doesn't do anything for people like me*' speaks of expectations towards the state, that it should either create jobs, or compensate with unemployment benefit. The demand that the state should 'make work' is of course not restricted to post-Soviet citizens, indeed this is perhaps the most important criterion for assessing governments in Europe too: are they willing and able to create a situation of full employment and thus prosperity?

Elmira knows full-well that the nature of the state and economy has changed profoundly from what her parents grew into. Work aims, conditions and responsibilities have radically shifted. Socialist rewards in rising standard of living, medals, celebrations and status are no longer available, vestiges being the celebration of Women's Day, Teachers' and Veterans' Day. The all-encompassing state has shrunk, withdrawn its dreams, order, guarantees and controls. If the speeches of Kyrgyz heads of state still speak of building a happier country and better lives, everyone knows their capacity and willingness to re-order society is drastically reduced. Despite its violences, controls and increasing discrepancy between rhetorical promises and delivery, the Soviet state is recalled widely as a legitimate one, a provider, whereas the current government is widely repudiated as rapacious and the locus of injustice.²⁰² Yet we have seen that the current government continues its claims to legitimacy partly by continuing works of transforming nature and creating *kul'tura* through projects like the Kambar Ata GES. We have also seen that entitlements to land portions were based on birthplace as well as work records in the early 90s.

'Real' work, as a contribution to society, is now limited to teachers, health workers and bureaucrats, with a possible extension into the plethora of NGO posts. These are precisely the jobs that are not directly linked to industrial or agricultural production. Now only a lucky, skilled or well-connected minority are state employees, policemen, town hall

²⁰² Unlike East Europeans, Kyrgyz citizens seem not at all prone to "*romancing the market and reviling the state*" (Weiner 2006: 572).

officials or nurses. Apart from the top brass, these jobs rarely offer a liveable wage. What they do offer is status, a measure of security and access to networks and opportunities for diverting state funds or extorting fees many times higher than the salary. So what are the alternatives? Visions of work are now oriented towards the opportunities higher education, local investment or- on a huge scale- migrant labour can offer.²⁰³ You may work for a private individual or company, become self-employed or an employer in your own right. In each of these positions, it will be significant whether your close working relationships are with relatives and friends, or with strangers. In the following, we shall see how each of these livelihood options is assessed locally, in the aftermath of privatising a state farm.

Recall Yrysbek's trip to work in Turkey (chapter 6), and the way it transformed his dreams as well as interactions with his friends on the one hand, and wife on the other. Recall how he felt transported from a 'cave' to a fairy tale. His new-found confidence and ambition went along with quite a new work ethic too: he felt (now in his mid-30s) that he should make an effort for the next decade or two, then he could deserve a rest. Yrysbek's enthusiasm is partly what makes Elmira so ambiguous about *jailoo*-based work. *Jailoo* work is not *kul'turnii*, it is located geographically and temporally *elsewhere* from Yrysbek's Turkish work experience.²⁰⁴ Taking into account work places like the Toktogul dam and associated workers' town, migrant destinations, *jailoos*, the household work of *kelins* and the office work of the mayor, it is clear that the spatial separation of work is quite marked, and that types of work are a large factor in how these places are assessed. Spittler has argued against the assumption that industrialization brought the separation of 'work' and 'life', that pre-industrial farmers would also go to the fields, purely to work (Spittler 2008: 276). This is true for Kyrgyz farmers too. Nevertheless, the distinction between the different places noted above is a consequence primarily of Soviet-era economic and political modernizations, if not strictly industrialization.²⁰⁵ Elmira's comments about her work point to a comparative way of thinking about ways of making a living, and indeed, a hierarchical one. Collecting manure, in

²⁰³Migration statistics for Kyrgyzstan often present conflicting data, but they all agree on very high levels of outmigration, both temporary and permanent since 1990. A conservative estimate counts ca. 400.000 Kyrgyz migrants to Russia alone in the period 1990-2004 from a population of 5 million. (Source: Goskomstat Rosii/Russian bureau of statistics 2004).

²⁰⁴ Recall Anarbek miming a housewife's reaction to the allocation of sheep in the 90s: '*Me, I'm not going to be a shepherd!*'

²⁰⁵ Vitebsky notes a perhaps even stronger separation of taiga (place for hunting and herding reindeer) and village for the rest of life (2005: 193-4).

her eyes symbolizes the most humble of livings, that of the livestock herder. In chapter 2 I demonstrated how *jailoos* are on the other hand highly valued. Elmira and Anvar do appreciate the view from their *boz üi*, that their children grow up in clean air and sunshine, that their work provides relative security, excellent foods and good co-operation with their extended family. At the same time, Elmira minds that they have no alternatives, and that this work does not allow for the *kul'tura* associated with urban life, with objects like light bulbs and notions of progress.

In light of the hierarchy of professions inherited from the Soviet system, it is interesting to note that it is rare to find people describing themselves as 'farmers' (*dyikan*). This throws up questions of comparison with the Russian context, where Humphrey has pointed to a similar reluctance to call oneself a farmer, or peasant (Humphrey 2002a:137). The Kyrgyz word *dyikan* lies closer in meaning to farmer (Russian: *fermer*) than peasant (Russian: *kreč'tianin*). One reason why *dyikan* is not considered a good way of describing current small-scale farming, is that the agricultural side of the farm, producing fruit and vegetables does not feature in people's descriptions of their household economy, though the home garden and patch of fields is the baseline of even the poorest rural dweller. Indeed, even quite substantial field holdings are usually called *ogorod*, Russian for 'kitchen garden'. Also, being a *dyikan* implies it is the same kind of thing as 'being a teacher'. But a *dyikan* has no formal superior, no regular wage or rights associated with his or her work. In this sense, a *dyikan* is not a profession, a choice. It may well be that keeping animals and working a few fields feels like a last resort, a transitory existence that does not even deserve the name of a farm (cf. Liechti 2008: 9).

Versions of serving People: being a good *Kelin*, *Moldo* or Leader

I try to ask Elmira which parts of her daily round she likes best or least. But the question does not make much sense to her: there is no point in classifying tasks like this, since she is responsible for them all. Nor does she think of herself as having time outside of working. Nevertheless, we celebrate plenty of parties, going to the sauna, getting tipsy, eating as much as we can and dancing into the night. Elmira does go and see her family in the district centre in the winter half of the year, when she is not tied to the high pastures.

Other village women complain about their work-load: '*there is always work*'. This is not to say that all women are on the go all day. It is rather that the work rhythm is dictated by

unceasing attention to the needs of the family and livestock, the garden and fields. This means that afternoon siestas, tea with friends and favourite soap operas are often interrupted by tasks such as counting the sheep in or hosting an unexpected guest. The necessity for someone to be there and respond to the needs of people, animals and crops also means that there is little distinction in time and space between leisure and work.

House and farm labour are distributed according to criteria of gender and (relative) age.²⁰⁶ Men and women have complementary work roles, though these are flexible: it is no dishonour for a woman to saddle a horse if there is no man or boy available to do this and vice versa. However, if the counter-part is there it would be a discourtesy for them not to pull their designated load. Women's work is often more constant and 'bitty' than men's work, which happens in more physically demanding, short bursts. If someone does not do their designated work, they may even be described as '*kishi emes*': not a person (Rebecca Reynolds: personal communication). To give her best is particularly important for a *kelin* and wife. She is often closely watched for signs of diligence or otherwise, whether she sweeps the yard early every morning, whether she bothers to make her own bread and good, labour-intensive meals. Her in-laws may not always relax these ideals if *kelins* also earn money at a day job.²⁰⁷ A *kelin*, even if she is 50, will always do *kelin*-type work in the household, as long as her parents-in-law are alive. It is only with their passing that she moves into a new work role, though some delegation may happen earlier if she becomes the senior *kelin* in the household.

Elmira does regret missed opportunities at formal education. And it is true that her health suffers from the mountain of work she faces every day. Yet it would be mistaken to describe her as unhappy or dissatisfied. Elmira gains a sense of satisfaction in looking after her much-loved children, in completing tasks well that she only learnt some year ago as a city girl. This is who she has made herself into; someone who makes a great effort to look after

²⁰⁶ See Yrysbek's comment that 'now is the time to work: until about 45-50.'

²⁰⁷ One often cited motivation for marriage by abduction is that the groom's mother wanted help in the household. Similarly, the most often heard complaint about a *kelin* is that she is lazy: this is also the most frequent ground for divorce that I heard from the side of the groom and family. Interestingly, *kelins* amongst themselves tend to complain less about the work load than about the clothes they are permitted to wear (trousers, uncovered hair) and whether they are allowed to see their natal family as often as they like. This indicates that young women (publicly) generally accept that working hard in this role is normal.

her family, lavish care and love on them and to be a good person.²⁰⁸ Her industriousness has earned her a very good reputation with her mother-in-law and elder sisters-in-law. In fact, Elmira's older in-laws are concerned that with all her care-taking, she neglects her own health. When Elmira gives birth to a fourth child, they find a way of lightening her load by sending other dependent young relatives to work the livestock and household with Anvar and Elmira. This *kelin's* contribution to the family economy is recognised and rewarded.

Attentive care and application is not the only mark of 'good work'. Almost all work requires skill: caring for livestock and orchards, raising children, sewing quilts, kneading bread dough properly, being an attentive host. Learning these tasks, I was forced to realize that hurrying or attempting too many things at once lead to spoiling something, the milk boiling over, or overlooking a lost animal in the pasture. I learnt how important it is to pace oneself with tea breaks and taking turns at combing out cashmere goats or harvesting potatoes, otherwise the cashmere or potato harvest might not turn out well.²⁰⁹

In the emphasis on enskillment as a feature of work in the household, on the farm or with animals, the Kyrgyz mothers and daughters-in-law, the school teachers and shepherds that I know would agree with Tim Ingold's focus on enskillment (Ingold 2000: 10-11). A good upbringing is oriented to skilfulness (Bunn 2000: 295). But this kind of enskillment is not necessarily *kul'tura*. Yes, I imagine my Kyrgyz teachers saying, learning to pour the tea properly is extremely important and is a feature of a well-brought up person. This quality might be described as *tarbiia* (good education) or *tartip* (order, discipline) rather than '*kul'tura*'. On the other hand, *tartip* is recognized as an element of *kul'tura*.²¹⁰ Elmira also has *tartip* in the sense that she does her work without complaint.

²⁰⁸It is likely, and perhaps ironic that the very *tartip* girls learn early on at home, as part of their education to being a good *kelin*, allows many girls to excel at school and then at university, as an avenue of escaping the work of a rural *kelin*. Other girls find the burden of housework too heavy to labour intensely at school as well, or do not share these dreams.

²⁰⁹ Hurrying in villages is a sporadic necessity rather than a constant instinct: to get a shared taxi due to leave, to get to school on time, to get the washing in before the rain or to stop two stallions from attacking each other. Insofar, Thompson's contrast between the task-orientation of peasants and industrial work valued through time, rings true here (Thompson 1991: 358 and 385).

²¹⁰ See the discussion of '*kul'tura*' in chapter 6. Whether or not 'madaniyat' is described as having come with the Russians or not, this idea of cultured-ness has no place for pouring the tea well as a sign of cultivation.

Elmira and Anvar tell me '*we work for our children*': they hope to put their children through university and build them a modest house in the capital one day.²¹¹ But from a very early age, their children are also involved in taking care of the household and farm. The duty to serve the very young and seniors is particularly emphasized in educating girls and at school. A school poster designed by students presents '*Precious Ideas*', for example the proverbs: '*Education adds another head to your head [helps you achieve your aims] and makes you more beautiful*' and '*those who forget the testament [labour] of a teacher, cannot handle the tasks facing the Motherland*'.²¹² Grown children later frequently contribute to their parents' livelihood, so it is clear that not only are parents working for children, but children are working for parents and other relatives too, whether earning abroad or keeping the household going at home. Indeed, in the absence of social security, liveable wages and pensions, children's labour is essential. But not everyone is so fortunate with their children's earning power or willingness to share: this is a frequent source of dissatisfaction and family strain.

In contrast to an idea of employment voiced by Elmira, which hinges on the Soviet experience of full employment by the state, we have here a kinship economy that depends on mutual help.²¹³ This is an alternative collective to the one projected by Socialism: the family and neighbourhood as the unit of generalised reciprocity, rather than serving the brigade, nation or humanity.²¹⁴ What both kin expect and the Soviet state expected, namely service in the form of respect and work may look similar, but the units these actions and attitudes are directed towards diverge: on the one hand, the state, nation and humanity, on the other, the family and neighbourhood. These differences are enough to make work for family or state look radically different to Elmira. She would experience herself very differently as a Socialist hero working for a *cause* than as a *kelin*. But there are further permutations of the idea of

²¹¹ Recall also Yrysbek's comments after returning from Turkey: '*now is the time to work.*' Weiner also cites Czech women tolerating their bad working conditions for the sake of their children's future (2006: 573).

²¹² Asyl Oilor: '*Bilim Bashynga bash koshot, kelbetinge kerilgen körk koshot*' and '*Mugalimdin emgegin unutkan adam, meken jügün arkalai albait*'.

²¹³ It would require further research to ascertain in what other ways kinship has taken the place of the state (rather than 'state capture' as suggested by Schatz and Collins) and how this may have changed kin relationships.

²¹⁴ The '*kolektif*' in the early Soviet Union referred to the Party, later to working groups such as brigades and enterprises (Ashwin 1999: 10). Nobody ever used the term for family or relatives, this is a group association reserved for the work place.

‘serving people’ that are neither Socialist nor kin-bound.

Midin *Ake* has been keen for us to meet.²¹⁵ I have seen him several times, officiating at marriage ceremonies and funerals. His wife not being home, he takes it upon himself to offer me homemade bread and jam. Midin *Ake* tells me how his life was turned around by a dream he saw in the 1980s, commanding him to '*namaz okuu*' (literally, to read and study prayer). To '*namaz okuu*' means becoming an active Muslim, a *moldo*. This implies following religious rules much more closely than the average Kyrgyz: most importantly praying five times a day and renouncing alcohol. It also means studying the Koran and being asked to lead prayer, to conduct funerals, marriages and circumcisions. Midin *Ake* assures me that he used to be a real layabout, a hard drinker, bad father and husband who did not hesitate to beat his wife. But now, he says, he works very hard for people, visiting to pray for their dead and perform healing ceremonies. This is a duty one cannot refuse, however heavy the burden may be.²¹⁶ I hear very similar accounts of conversion from two other *moldos* in our village.²¹⁷ To Midin, the connection between faith and the obligation to *try hard* is essential. He explains that '*people drink because they have no hope. But Islam gives you hope and teaches you tartip*'.²¹⁸ Islam is the 'cleanest' (*eng taza*) of religions and its stringent rules force your body into discipline: washing, praying, renouncing alcohol and entertaining proper, cordial and truthful relations with people.²¹⁹

My host father Tolkunbek agrees with the idea of serving people, but he conceives of this service quite differently. He says he has no time to run to the mosque every few hours. But he is frequently out on business, organizing school anniversaries or attending a meeting to bring forward the new village development project. On top of this, he serves as the *uruu bashchi*, the ‘manager’ of the lineage who organizes funerals or helps someone in trouble

²¹⁵ *Ake*: older brother, respectful form of address for any man older than oneself.

²¹⁶ For similar pious works, see Louw 2007: 125. Werbner writes on Pakistani Sufi brotherhoods performing labours of love (Werbner 2003: 40).

²¹⁷ For similar accounts of conversion see Louw 2007, Montgomery 2006.

²¹⁸ Interestingly, the exact opposite argument was made in anti-religious campaigns in Central Asia after the war: that religion was a distraction from work, a waste of time.

²¹⁹ Compare Liu's observations of Uzbek Kyrgyzstani elders in the city of Osh: 'I found that Uzbeks in post-Soviet Osh tended to view Islam primarily as a positive social force that produced good communities and virtuous persons' (Liu 2002:28) and Montgomery: 'I heard claims that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was going to “bring the good life” of employment and higher wages while ushering in a new morality and the end of corruption' (Montgomery 2007:56).

with the police.²²⁰ Despite these kin-related types of leadership and service functioning widely, '*azyr tartip jok*' ('there's no discipline now') is a widespread complaint among people who were socialised in the Soviet Union.²²¹ Dulat Ata, a former Party functionary and *moldo* put it thus:

'Both systems are good. With the system now, no one tells anyone else what to do. But at that time [during the Soviet Union] we had to fulfil plans. It was obligatory. I've seen three systems, three generations from Tsarism and Kyrgyzstan being a colony of the Soviet Union and now: erkindik [freedom]. ...The most important difference nowadays is that there is no tartip: there are lots of laws, but no implementation, lots of words and no action.'

Tartip in this quote refers to the ability of the state to both force and motivate good work discipline and productivity. Now that capacity has catastrophically declined, and has not been replaced by people's own will to work - and to work honestly, Dulat says. *Tartip* appears here as both an external force, and an internal motivation, one or the other being necessary for good husbandry. Beyond the need to survive, what could indeed be the source of an internal motivation to work? One alternative source of internal motivation is Midin's faith, both as a sense of obligation and sense that justice will be done. Dulat went on to describe good leadership as 'looking after people' (*el baguu*), like parents or grand-parents look after children, or as shepherds look after their flock. When I asked the mayor why he did his job despite the difficulties of mediating quarrels in the village, he shrugged and commented that '*elge kyzmat kyluu jakshy*': 'it is good to serve (the) people'.²²²

We have here quite different kinds of leaders, Muslim clerics, Communist Party functionaries, lineage 'managers' all confirming the importance of *tartip* as a quality of a good leader (whether in a person or institution), and as an effect that such leadership has on their

²²⁰ This is not a position to be confused with that of the elder (*aksakal*) who has formal leadership and moral authority as head of the *uruu* (patriline), and may also serve on an *aksakal* court, the lowest official organ of justice.

²²¹ Bazarkul, the former *kulak*, made a similar comment in chapter 6. Similar comments on state *tartip* are also made in Beyer (2010: 172).

²²² A civil servant is a '*kyzmatchy*'. Another word for 'service' is *teilöö*, used in contexts such as serving customers. The mayor's motivations were more complex than he lets on here.

constituency.²²³ In all these instances, a leader should have both *tartip* and *tazalyk* and the authority to enforce or inspire it in others. I heard teachers often mentioning creating *tartip* as one of their primary responsibilities. We also have a bridge between the idea of good leaders looking after people, good shepherding and good parenting or service as a *kelin*. However one big difference between the ‘service’ of a *kelin* and a mayor is that a daughter-in-law does not care for others from a position of leadership.²²⁴

Those who make an Effort...

As we have seen, an emphasis on hard work as legitimating one's rights as a citizen was a prominent feature of the Soviet order. This is not to say that collective farms weren't dogged by the 'free rider' problem and a lack of 'labour discipline'. Brigadiers, chairmen and party leaders needed to constantly entice, inveigle, threaten people to over-achieve or at least achieve their production targets (Humphrey 1998: 262-5). If you want to be successful now, whether as a herder or housewife, the assumption is still that you have to '*araket kil*': to make an effort, to try hard, to give your best. Many common proverbs, thought to embody traditional Kyrgyz wisdom, speak of this: '*köp ishtegen köp tishteit*' (those who work a lot will eat a lot), '*araketke bereket*' (you will be blessed if you try hard), '*adamdin kiiminen taanibait, ishinen taanyit*' (you will not know the person by their clothes, but by their work) and '*uchenie svet, a neuchenie t'ma*' (Russian: education is light, ignorance -literally non-education- is darkness).²²⁵

When I asked about the source of the emerging discrepancies in wealth over the last twenty years, people frequently voiced the opinion that the source of wealth is labour.²²⁶ I found this claim pervasive despite the fact that people's access to networks, skills, property,

²²³Gambold and Heady cite Hungarians considering the kolkhoz director as key figure to success, and people finding him (almost invariably a him) a good leader if he can discipline people (2003:269).

²²⁴In fact of course a *kelin* such as Nargiza (see chapter 5 and 8) or Elmira can have substantial leadership in the household, depending on their situation, personality and the respect they have accrued through ‘good work’. Mirgul, the friend I visited the Cholpon Ata *mazar* with (see chapter 4), was much less comfortable with her in-laws.

²²⁵ Compare these with Lampland's very different list of Hungarian proverbs on work: '*you can't become wealthy with honourable labour*' or '*those who work don't have time to make money*' (Lampland 1995: 359)

²²⁶ This opinion has also been recorded by Liechti 2002:102. The causal link between poverty and laziness was often made regardless of the person's own material circumstances: this was a sentiment not only voiced by the rich.

involvement in life events bringing tragedy or good fortune are manifestly not the same. It is not that my interlocutors were unaware of this, in fact they acknowledged these factors if I explicitly asked for their influence on wealth differentials. But why is this considered an 'additional' aspect, rather than assuming, as I do, that poverty has fundamental structural causes? How should I take these comments? Are they a knowing imitation of Communist and World Bank pep talks? Are they a way of waiving responsibility for the suffering of one's neighbours? I argue that there is reason to see these comments as more than pure imitation of powerful discourses or a convenient myth about the causes of poverty.

However, if the association between idleness and poverty is one that all my interlocutors could agree on, no-one implied that wealthy people were of necessity hard-working. Nor does it follow that every poor person is lazy. The association is a causal one in only one direction. If someone has neither formal employment nor a sizeable plot of land, herd or other capital, then they will indeed have a lot of time on their hands. Even a *kelin* like Elmira would be less busy if she did not have, or was not trusted with, several mares and cows to milk. This correlation means that as a statement of fact, one could say poor people tend not to be very busy, rather than saying that they are lazy. But the claim works on another level too: as a general world view or orientation, bringing two kinds of goodness together: the inherent value of work (as service to others) and its presumed effect in wealth. The statement has such force, because it is the only kind of rhetoric that is publicly available that offers a promising future, a world in which one's actions matter.²²⁷ 'People are poor because they don't work properly' is to some extent an ideological statement, willing the world to be just.²²⁸ In some sense, the current association of wealth with work is parallel to the reward system for Stakhanovites, and an inversion of the early Socialist view of rich farmers (*kulaks*) as criminals.

²²⁷ Finke notes a similar conviction among Kazakh pastoralists in Mongolia (2004:133) and Kaneff and Lale Yalcin similarly in Ukraine (2003: 233). The idea of the undeserving poor may also be a continuity from Soviet times, when everyone able was supposed to work, and everyone else was supposed to get welfare. According to the logic of such a system, those who fall between the cracks must be unworthy of welfare.

²²⁸ Certainly someone like Anarbek, who said '...Before, in the Soviet Union there was more motivation, though chances were perhaps less than now at making it. Now it depends on whether you want to, and on your head. Then you have bigger chances than during the Soviet period.' (chapter 6) was convinced that the market economy was more just in this sense. Other researchers have also noted a measure of self-blame, or blaming the Soviet order for encouraging laziness (Schmidt 2006: 37-8 in Kyrgyzstan, Finke 2004: 123 on Kazakh Mongols, Weiner on female Czech workers 2006: 585).

'Slavery' and 'Entrepreneurship'

While emphasizing the loss of *tartip*, Dulat Ata also expresses a sense of relief that the demise of a centralized economy has meant an end to orders, and being told what to do. Many people expressed their satisfaction at no longer being subject to rough treatment by brigadiers exhorting or even dragging people out of their beds to work. In this sense, there is a new sense of freedom. In chapter 6 Anarbek expressed this in the gesture of turning his pen: flipping to a time when entrepreneurship is needed. On the other hand, the Soviet Union is frequently cited as freeing the people from slavery and ignorance. Indeed, literal slavery was a feature of Central Asian society until the early twentieth century. Slaves were captured in warfare or bought, but were fairly rapidly integrated as low-status kin in the group they joined.

In most of the forms of work discussed above, there is some form of integration of labour in the extended family. Other forms are integrated in systems of patronage, often framed as fictive kinship, where more senior or wealthy 'relatives' employ poorer 'brothers and sisters', for uncertain rewards and some form of protection (Ismailbekova forthcoming). This kind of patronage, as well as formal wage contracts in the village (i.e. serving someone wealthier) are sometimes mentioned with contempt or anger as *kulduk*: 'slavery'. This is one reason why, despite complaints about the lack of paid work in the village, it is difficult to find a reliable farm hand. The description of work for the wealthy as 'slavery' can also extend to migrant labour abroad.²²⁹ Since full, legal slavery is such a fresh historical memory, calling a condition 'slavery' is likely to have a very strong impact.²³⁰ One respondent explained simply that someone who is working for someone else in the village is by definition a poor person. Therefore helping out acquaintances for money amounts to admitting publicly that you cannot manage without selling your self-determination to others. It puts you in a junior position, like a *kelin* or younger relative.

²²⁹ Labour in Russia may also be described as slave-like (*kuldai*) (Reeves 2007: 21). Interestingly, I have not heard *badachis* referred to as 'slaves', although historically these were poor people serving wealthier ones. Perhaps this is because in the current situation, *badachis* have a relatively high bargaining power in setting the terms of the *bada* agreement.

²³⁰ Humphrey describes a similar reluctance among Buryats. The word '*barlag*', worker, is associated with being a slave, servant. The Russian word *batrak*, labourer can also be used as an equivalent for slave (Humphrey 1998: 307, 494) Humphrey also describes Buryats feeling that paying someone implies capitalist exploitation. Instead, people 'help' each other, and call employees 'colleagues' (1998: 466, 480).

Unlike most others small-holders in his village, as a child Janarbek always dreamed of being a farmer and looking after animals. This surely accounts for some of his success: he has a real interest and gets satisfaction beyond wealth from looking after his animals as well as possible. He served in several capacities on the collective farm: moving from driving a tractor to assisting the vet to managing the dairy farm. He is used to checking people's work and giving advice from a position of authority. On the one hand he is respected for his success and knowledge; on the other hand his imperious tone does not make him popular.²³¹ Nevertheless, he continues to expound on the proper way of doing things, as a way of teaching, of sharing aspirations and of modelling *entrepreneurship*. He certainly has the vision and organizational capacity to deal with his lineage duties and to drive forward a development project. This forward-looking bent is something that draws somewhat ambivalent praise from others, as Maksat, a former colleague of Janarbek's in the veterinary service, comments:

'I really respect Janarbek. Back then [in the early 90s] our heads didn't work, we weren't forward looking. We just gave away the mare we got out of the division of the sovkhos because we didn't want to look after her. Janarbek took the farm equipment and nobody could say anything because he was the manager and all the ownership documents had his name on them. ... He should buy votes like everybody else at the next communal election. I'm his man.'

Here we have an implicit acknowledgment that wealth not only stems from work, but also derives from unequally distributed capacities and resources, knowledge and contacts. Understanding is admired as a legitimate source of wealth while the alleged abuse of a position of authority draws oblique criticism. In other words, work and the knowledge acquired through work appear as the only legitimate way to material well-being, social recognition and authority.

Maksat recognizes Janarbek's ability to read the signs of the time (obvious in retrospect), to grasp an opportunity, take a risk, show foresight and fulfil an ambition on one's

²³¹ Gambold and Heady describe successful farmers in the Russian countryside being viewed even more negatively: as not helping kin or charging for aid, being envied and mistrusted (2003: 282).

own, something best described as *entrepreneurship*.²³² Examples of creating a living through enterprise in the village include keeping bees, building a small water mill, trading in scrap metal, socks or vodka, and growing beans instead of potatoes. But many of these opportunities require a minimum investment of capital or connections. Acquiring a stand at the market requires contacts at the very least, and payments to the market's owner. Or they require seizing the moment during privatization and unfairly acquiring abandoned machinery or beehives.²³³ But in the absence of the ability to make an investment, opportunities for becoming a hero-entrepreneur are few and far between. So one may well be forced to perform manual labour for someone and take orders as a 'slave'. Elsewhere, the double bind of the ideal and unachievable entrepreneur has been described as emasculating (Humphrey 2002b: 10). There is in fact a special term for young men who live on their wives' earnings: they are *alfonsi*. Indeed, falling between the stools of dignified employment and the unachievable hero-entrepreneur goes a long way to explaining the scarcity of farm labourers in a closely related village.²³⁴

To summarise, the personal views and life projects of Midin the *moldo*, of Dulat the former Party functionary and of Janarbek's ambiguous sources of success all emphasise the obligation to serve the people, to model and imbue *tartip* and honest *tazalyk*. Elmira clearly also models *tartip* and service. In a sense, this is their definition of what work should consist of. As with the frequent exhortation to work for success, these views and practices have quite different sources, which happen to overlap in their effect. All the people we met above agree that in principle, there is no other legitimate, ethically uncompromised way to wealth or good standing and authority than - hard work.

²³² See also Yurchak 2003: 73. Viewing individuals as responsible for success or failures has also been noted in Ukraine. According to Wanner, collectivism has left a legacy of mistrusting collective efforts and fearing disempowerment there (Wanner 2005: 519 and 524).

²³³ The quality of 'unfairness' can refer to actual illegal appropriation, buying communal property for laughably low prices or simply keeping knowledge of such resources secret.

²³⁴ The fact that more kinds of work are acceptable for a woman can be to their advantage rather than disadvantage in the current economic climate: it is easier to reconcile small trade with a sense of dignified self than for a man (cf. Willis 1977:96 on class culture that keeps men in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, because office work is for 'sissies'). Compare also Heyat's discussion of Azerbaijani women entrepreneurs (2002). Shreeves has noted that the idea of private, as in privatization, is associated with masculinity. Writing of Kazakhstan, she describes men who are not able to be the main breadwinners as feeling emasculated (Shreeves 2002:223-5).



Figure 22: Record of Soviet army service and work medals

Converging Discourses in 'Hard Work' Rhetoric

The Toktogul dam can be seen to stand as a particularly powerful and poignant symbol of (collective) effort and its benefits. At the same time, the fact that the labour investment of previous generations in the collective farm is now often plainly abandoned (uncultivated fields, ruins of stables and processing plants, disintegrating irrigation channels) must be at once an impressive and discouraging sight. Nevertheless, work as the *transformation of nature* in a Marxist vein does not stand out as the primary conception of work in everyday life.

I introduced Elmira's everyday life of hard physical labour, her satisfaction in serving her family and her longing and distaste for the *jailoo*. We also encountered Liudmilla Fedorovna's commitment to bettering the human condition through hydroelectric projects, work that radically transforms nature under the patronage of a socialist state. Janarbek's vision of entrepreneurship and Midin's commitment to Islam as forms of leadership and *taza*, honest work are further positions joining the chorus that *work is good*. Elmira, Liudmilla Fedorovna, Janarbek and Midin all have different work histories and different values associated with them. The label 'work' (*ish/jumush/rabota*) disguises a plethora of activities that may or may not count as 'work' for different actors. In juxtaposing these visions of work, I hope to have shown how these different hierarchies of value jostle with each other but also how they articulate with each other.

I have shown that the pervasively high value of work is fed from different, formally conflicting sources of moral authority. On the one hand we have Kyrgyz expectations of the young serving older generations, with particularly young daughters and wives being judged according to these criteria. This is evident in Elmira's conception of her working life as serving her children and extended family. We have evidence of a more general encouragement of work in Kyrgyz proverbs and school posters. In addition, we have seen that Islam is understood by practitioners like Midin as a method of self-disciplining and engendering hope in a better future.

In all these visions, a better future is said to depend on dutiful work, also described as *service* (*kызmat, teilöö*), both in one's own livelihood and in serving the community. It is also possible to describe 'service' as care, i.e. being concerned with, attentive to other people and in the special case of leaders (like shepherds or parents) as *protecting* and *nurturing*. A recurring theme in visions of work is *making an effort*. As the saying goes, '*araketke bereket*':

you will be blessed with abundance if you try hard. If not with material return, then with the dignity and respect of a good *kelin*. And if not in this world, then certainly in the next, for example as a Muslim cleric serving the village. The ability or will to make an effort, day after day, with faith in positive outcomes, for example of Midin praying five times a day or Janarbek taking the very best care of cows, can be described as *tartip*. This is surprisingly close to Marx's initial definition of work as conscious and deliberate action. Although *tartip* is usually mentioned as a positive quality, both as external force and internal motivation, one can certainly also read this kind of external disciplining as forcing obedience, an unfree condition. In both cases however, I think *tartip* would be considered the result of a kind of upbringing or education that fosters skilful dedication to fulfilling a task: whether fostered in the parental home, school, mosque or *Komsomol*.

We further find a sense of work as an ethical imperative and legitimization of citizenship in Soviet state rhetoric, in films on building the Toktogul dam as well as collective farming practices, celebrated in Liudmilla Fedorovna's museum displays and in the complaints of Dulat, a former Party functionary. Although years of labour on the collective farm where recognized as the basis for land distribution in the era of privatization, this does not currently translate into glorifying manual labour as such. Though the collected writings of Lenin remain on many bookshelves, the rule of 'those who work' and the relevance of class hardly featured in the conversations I had or listened to. Class seems an obsolete category, while characterizing people through their work (its quality and type) continues to be highly relevant.²³⁵

So far, the sources of the *good work* argument look local: part of Kyrgyz kinship ideology, the Socialist experience or Islam. Despite all this, someone like Yrysbek feels he learnt about proper work practices and aims abroad. There is indeed a new emphasis by powerful external institutions such as U.S. aid agencies and the World Bank – who forcefully encouraged full privatisation in the early 1990s - on *entrepreneurship*, the ability to strike out on one's own with a business venture, is what the new economy requires.²³⁶ This conviction

²³⁵ One question I am not yet able to answer is why class has become invisible in Central Asia, both in popular discourse and academia. Part of the answer may be that unlike the Kazakhs or Mongols, Kyrgyz nomadic society did not have inherited aristocratic titles. Lampland has suggested that since in the 1970s the Soviet Union proclaimed an end to class struggle, so from then on in principle everyone was a member of the proletariat (Lampland 2000: 218).

²³⁶ cf. USAID programmes for 'an Improved Environment for the Growth of Small and Medium Enterprises' and IMF press release June 2008 on strengthening the business environment.

is shared by aspiring businessmen and even very modest political leaders like Tolkunbek and Anarbek.²³⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, here free market discourse joins on seamlessly to Socialist discourse in urging hard work. It is hard to deny that both discourses (on one level opposing) have left their trace on Tolkunbek or Liudmilla's sense of morality and of themselves as people. As Dilley has suggested, the economic model here has 'filtered down' into people's 'interpretive schemata' as a source of solace and a mode of sense-making (Dilley 1992:23). This convergence of discourses and experiences explains the emphasis on the value of work, in the face of widespread unemployment. It should also be noted that this very scarcity is likely to make *having* a paid job a mark of success, a measure of recognition no longer available to most.

Both the idea of service and entrepreneurship are opposed to the negative image of slavery, a condition where giving service is not a choice, a gift of self-directed activity or even respectable duty, but an onerous necessity and admission of dire poverty. Distaste for this condition has a very real effect on the rural labour market, both in the *kolkhoz* era and current scarcity of farm hands. In this sense Kyrgyz people prefer control over their work, and may reject local employment for similar reasons that Malay young men prefer unemployment to being bossed around on a plantation (Ong 1987: 111).

In the above ethnography, work appears as a) social duties and mutual help, b) as activities that contribute to a livelihood and c) activities that count as wage-labour. It would be a crude distortion to define the value of Kyrgyz work as the products it generates, just like it would be a crude distortion to do the same operation on the meaning of the *jailoo*. Unlike in Harris' example of Aymara foregrounding ploughing as archetypal work, I can find no such archetype in my case study. Nor do I think Kyrgyz people would agree with Harris' Aymara that work is what makes you properly human or displays your vitality. It *does* make you a particularly valued *person* though. So what kind of work do people aspire to, that gives both the dignity of social recognition and satisfies material needs? It is clear that in general, Soviet labour ideals and conditions covered all three aspects of work (social duty and help, livelihood, wage labour). Now, they are rarely collapsed into one job, or person's biography. The large-scale withdrawal of the state from the labour market also means a withdrawal of means of receiving recognition and social inclusion. In the category of wage-labour, there is a

²³⁷ This may be an example that 'repeated assertions that success derives from practicing ideal market behaviour lends strong confirmation to others about the validity of the model.' The market may be becoming a 'model of and model for life', for some (Dilley 1992:21 and 23).

split between the high status and low incomes of professions such as teaching, and the high wages and generally shameful content of wage labour abroad. Neither can teaching provide the kind of income that a middling farmer may secure. While the local policeman is likely to display his unofficial income spreading on his mid-riff, and thus his success as an 'entrepreneur' of sorts, this way of working does not earn him respect. In the case of a *kelin* like Elmira the opposite may be the case: she never sees a penny for her honest (*taza*) work, but is rewarded with a good reputation and help in the future. She may earn the same kind of respect as the Socialist dam builder collecting a laughably small pension. Now, there seems hardly an occupation that provides a livelihood, professional status, recognition and is yet not subject to the temptations and accusations of *koruptsiia*. In the following chapter I will say more about the dreams of many teenagers to become a Kyrgyz pop, a career promising a glamorous, modern - and Kyrgyz life-style.

Elmira, Midin and Tolkunbek together clearly operate with a multiple sense of work. For example, Elmira consciously never stints on her care for family and livestock (a big factor in turning her into a 'good person'), but is also resentful about her 'unemployment' (invoking the third meaning of work).²³⁸ Elmira's disgust at collecting dung is not only based on the fact that it is hard physical labour, for this is something both a good Communist and good Kyrgyz *kelin* might be proud of. She is also representing to me, a city girl, how far *boz üis* and sheep are from her idea of European and Socialist civilization, ideas that she probably assumes I share. Though a state-led organization of livestock farming that was oriented towards urban/industrial norms of specialized wage-labour shape the background of her complaint, I am not sure whether she would in fact prefer a place in a dairy brigade.

Good Work and Personhood

If work is the only honourable way of making it, it also appears as a particularly strong dimension of personhood, a project for the self and one's children, a way of receiving recognition. This is especially the case where work appears as *service*. The wealthy are thus not necessarily thought of as good workers. Even if work does not return just rewards, in the

²³⁸ Nam provides a similar example of Siberian print workers: 'Very often people at the workplace complain about physical exhaustion because of having worked too hard at the dacha, but when asked if engaging in domestic agriculture at the dacha is work, ... , they would answer, "No! It is a rest [otdykh] for my soul. A rest in the open air, nature.'" The use of the word work (noun: *rabota*, or verb: *rabotat'*) is very contextual (Nam 2007: 174).

case of Soviet era workers losing their good pensions for example, a working life is still a source of dignity in the face of sometimes desperate living conditions. You can still walk upright in the knowledge that you are a hero mother who raised a dozen children, that the grain you threshed fed soldiers fighting Hitler, or that the children you taught still honour you with speeches at the end of every school year.

Elsewhere, research has posited strong generational differences in the post-Socialist era about the value of work. Nazpary has described the sudden stratification according to new parameters of wealth that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan, turning the next generation into young people that find work degrading and prefer being the consumers of today rather than planning for a future that holds no promise (Nazpary 2002: 6). Rofel in post-Maoist China finds generational differences of another kind. She finds different attitudes towards womanhood and work in three generations of factory workers: the early socialist generation, for whom going out to work still had some taint of shame, and who relished being freed from traditional womanhood, the generation of the Cultural Revolution who value the politics of challenge and opposition at the workplace, and the post-Mao generation of women, who rediscover themselves as demonstratively apolitical mothers and wives (Rofel 1999: 7, 64). Lampland's ethnography of a Hungarian collective farm in the 1980s also distinguishes generational attitudes towards work. Whereas the elderly, remembering peasant farming and the Stalinist era see work as a personal sacrifice for a better collective future, the younger generation considers labour effort (measured in time) as giving a straightforward return in cash. To them, time is money and therefore unlike the first generation, labour is not valuable to them for its own sake (Lampland 1995: 343, 349).

Neither Elmira nor Yrysbek, both entering the world of adults in the post-Soviet era, fit the general description of young people despising work entirely, or seeing it purely as a cash-generating exercise. Returning from Turkey, Yrysbek denies that the motivation to work should be just to buy a nice car. To him, that kind of thinking is the greed he sees around him in our village. At the same time, it should be obvious from the examples above, that finding work that a) is not degrading and b) feeds self and family, can be very hard to find. Some people retreat from what looks like a hopeless search. My examples do not all suggest strong generational differences in attitudes to work, if generations are conceived as groups of contemporaries with a common historical experience. The example of Liudmilla Fedorovna's life history and consequent ideas about work as building Socialism are certainly unique and inimitable. But Elmira and Yrysbek's (new) sense of work are not diametrically opposed, or

reactive, as in the case of Nazpary's, Lampland's or Rofel's ethnography. I also think there is an aspect of generations that has been overlooked, namely the expectations of different ages in the life-cycle, which are very distinct in the Kyrgyz case. Perhaps in 50 years time, Yrysbek will look back on his life and take equal pride in his work biography, forgetting the many hours spent with a beer and, having given his best, take pleasure in the ease afforded to him as a senior citizen looked after by the next generation.

I have argued that though everyone knows fortune can deal people a good or bad hand, making an effort is the first step towards well-being of all kinds. Beyond that one might need a bit of luck, connections, capital, good relations in the family, but that is not what the project of making a good life for oneself and others must focus on. On the other hand, as every collective farm manager and parent knows, laziness can be the most effective weapon of the weak (Scott 1985). I have argued that the statement 'people are poor because they don't work properly' is *descriptive* in the sense that those without resources have little to work *with*, and so, too much time on their hands. The statement is also *normative* in the sense of willing the world to be just. Statements about hard and lazy workers also turn up as very divergent judgments of the Soviet system, either approving of the strict discipline people were held to or decrying that it did not foster better work discipline. Anarbek says:

'In Moscow I could have earned 300 roubles minimum if I had been able to go back. But I decided to stay in Kyrgyzstan in the 90s, to reform it. We needed privatization, because there was no motivation to work. Whether they worked or not, people got paid the same. They could just turn up to work, and sit around, and then go home, and get a salary.'

This assessment is quite different from Dulat's ('*now there is no tartip*') and yet, not unrelated: both recognize that work as wage-labour was available, even if their assessment with how much vigour, and with what motivation it was carried out, diverge. They also diverge on where the *tartip* should emerge from: Dulat deplores that the state has no powers of *tartip* now, while Anarbek is glad that people have the freedom to develop their own *tartip* now.²³⁹

²³⁹ Sometimes the equation of poor people and laziness also serves as a self-denigrating explanation for why Kyrgyzstan is the poor cousin of other post-Soviet nations like Russia, or in comparison to the anthropologist's home in Europe.

On the other hand, ethnic stereotypes of Uzbeks, Turks, Chinese and Jews as hard workers are not unambiguous. A talent for making money can also call forth contempt of avarice, deviousness and selfishness. Since these groups are also known as *traders*, their work becomes even more dubious.²⁴⁰ A service such as shop-keeping sometimes still bears the taint of illegitimacy: people sometimes comment that a *spekulator* makes an unfair profit by saving goods to sell at higher prices out of season, or exploits people's lack of access to cheaper offers. This was indeed a crime in the Soviet era. A trader's activity of transporting goods or extending credit does not count as production. As with lucrative state employment, success is full of moral pitfalls. One reason for the ambivalence about these kinds of work and workers may be that hospitality and generosity are often described as an ethnic marker of the Kyrgyz.²⁴¹ A poet and aid to the presidential administration once told me this hospitality was the reason Kyrgyzstan was not getting ahead economically: *'the Kyrgyz are proud that they would give their last piece of bread to a visitor, rather than their own children!'* he said. In his eyes, the Kyrgyz were too generous, also implying a lack of a 'savings' mentality, or prioritizing one's children over strangers. In contrast to trade or policing for example, mobile livestock herding integrated in the family network appears 'clean' and a properly Kyrgyz way of making a living. In my experience, though every farmer or *jailoo* user trades his animals for money on the market, this is never described as trade or speculation.

Migrant labour, describing unpopular work as 'slavery', or finding religious reasons for work are common tropes in other areas of the world too. So what is specific about the ideas and situation I describe? I hope to have shown that the multiple sources of invoking work as the source of good things (generating income, generating good persons) create a distinctive pattern: 'building Socialism', 'entrepreneurship', 'service' to elders and Muslims, as well as 'service' as leadership. I hope to have demonstrated that not all kinds of work are desirable kinds of work, and that the frames of valuation jar repeatedly: what is proper work in the eyes of Elmira and Liudmilla, Anarbek and Dulat is not at all the same thing. They all frame work differently, but the frames overlap in emphasizing that 'work' (whatever the content and purpose) should be done. The conceit of standing on your own two feet, independence at the individual or household level (not being a slave, being an entrepreneur)

²⁴⁰ As Central Asian street traders have come under the suspicious gaze of the Russian state, so the Kyrgyz parliament periodically debates measures to restrict Chinese traders doing business in Kyrgyzstan. See reports on Kyrgyz unease about the prominence of Chinese traders by Dalbaeva (2010) and Erkinov (2009).

²⁴¹ Compare the praise of Dyikanbai's wife Saikal by her descendant, emphasizing her unstinting hospitality in chapter 5.

often conflicts with feelings of entitlement, and narrative ties that bind countries (the former socialist brotherhood), kin and paternal state-citizen relationships. Each of the actors I introduced would draw and weight these links differently.

It is tempting to see 'kinship' as the enduring, Kyrgyz or Central Asian aspect of working lives, with a layer of communist and capitalist (together: industrialized) labour relations super-imposed. Can we conclude from the experience of Elmira and Liudmilla Fedorovna, of the *moldo* Midin and the entrepreneur Janarbek that 'building Socialism' has been replaced by building a family future and kinship reciprocities as the goal of work? As we have seen, more senior kin and those in need are entitled to help from their relatives.

What people mean when they say 'everyone is for themselves now' (*öz özüchün*) is explained by asking: service to *whom*? Elmira, Liudmilla Fedorovna and the Muslim clerics are united in their conception of their daily duties and activities that are 'service to the people' as *work*. Whether collecting dung for fuel, organising feasts or cleaning hydroelectric turbines, we can always describe the activity as making a contribution to a group, be it one's own children, classmates, the state or humanity. At the very least it means not being a burden to other people, while one is young and fit, as an *alfonsi*. The difference lies in who each of the people in this chapter are building a better world for: oneself, the immediate family, extended family group, 'society' or humanity. Whether a particular kind of work serves their relevant constituency is one way people judge work. Where the *jailoo* serves both the extended family and the (ethnic) Kyrgyz nation, the dam serves the state as well as the future of humanity. It is in this sense that the phrase '*everyone for themselves*' can be understood: that the collectivity which work is *for* and the institutional context in which it is done, has been reframed. Rather than seeing the survival or resurgence of kinship as the relevant collective entity, I would rather suggest that serving a group is a continuing aspect of work, which is simply not expressed in the same ways.

In consequence practices, even if they address a similar object of moral reasoning, have changed dramatically in many instances. Although linguistically, we can say that this is all 'work' (effort, activity contributing to livelihood or group broadly), actually work no longer equals work in associated ideology, content or effect. Different kinds of work have different effects on the scale of *kul'tura* or according to alternative frames of being a good person. For example, because the nature of the state and its relationship to work and workers has changed, the Kambar Ata dam is not the same kind of object as the Toktogul dam. As I discussed in chapter 3, the kind of subjects involved with it (individual, collective,

institutional) as owners – and also as *workers* - have shifted dramatically.

If I have made work the dominant theme in this chapter, I must also speak of activities such as hosting that are enjoyed for their own sake, or of parts of life like picnics that are ‘fed’ by work. I have argued so far that values are ‘emplaced’, for example in a hierarchy of work on a scale of *kul’tura* and Kyrgyzzness, or the concept of ‘blessing’ (*bata*) that people as well as places like *mazars* can give. If I have spoken of the burdens of history and the hardships of trying to get by in earlier chapters, I will end my discussion of moral geographies with a consideration of how places are celebrated and enjoyed.

Chapter 8: Celebrating Places: Picnics, Poetry and Song



Figure 23: Picnic in May

9th May 2008: a picnic (*pokhod*)²⁴²

It has been raining for a week, but today the sun is warming the air and intensifying the green of the leaves and the red of the moist earth, just in time for a picnic. Roza and her husband Maksat have invited me along with a few old class-mates. We are going to have a rest (*es alabiz*), play (*oinobuz*), Roza said.²⁴³ She is a dozen years older than me and always seems somehow both robust and easy-going. She is respected as an experienced nurse and puts a lot of effort into trudging around the village to see patients.

²⁴² People consistently used the Russian term '*pokhod*' to describe these expeditions. In Russian, a '*pokhod*' is a march, hike and can also be used in military context of a campaign, but I never heard it used like this. Outdoor meals and rest periods e.g. in between field work (ploughing, weeding, harvesting, irrigating) are not '*pokhod*'.

²⁴³ In other contexts, to play (*oino-*) can also mean that someone is mucking around in the streets, or flirting, having an affair or sex.

In the fresh morning air, five adults and four children pile into the old Volga, which otherwise serves as a village taxi. Maksat is kitted out in camouflage gear for the day: he likes going on hunting trips. We set off to pick wild onions and *kymyzdyk* (tall plant tasting rather like rhubarb) first, taking care not to remove the roots, so that they can grow back next year. Below the slopes, people are busy ploughing and planting maize, potatoes and sunflowers. Once or twice a lorry roars up the incline, carrying people and disassembled *boz üis* to the summer pastures. Keeping their distance ahead is a herd of horses grazing the new pasture: their stallion looks skinny, exhausted from siring foals, keeping a sharp look-out for wolves and fighting rivals at this time of year. After a hot hour's work, we bundle the collected vegetables into the car, ready to be salted and potted at home. We have a rewarding swig of *jarma*.²⁴⁴

We move on to a shady spot by a thundering river, and settle on felt mats and cushions to prepare our lunch. Maksat and his friend look after the fire, tea and shashlyk flavoured with coriander, while we ladies make up the salads. I've brought a contribution of fizzy drinks and plain biscuits. Roza keeps a wary eye on the children, warning them to keep away from the ice-blue water and - '*Hey, don't poke around in those holes: there's probably a snake and not a marmot down there!*' - she suddenly shouts. An excited party of school-girls on horse-back pass by on an '*exkursia*' with their school-teacher. Tucking into the shashlyk, we toast each other, hoping for many more picnics like this together. Inspired by beer and vodka, we launch into a round of songs: the classic 'White Swan' and smash hits 'Oh sisters-in-law' and 'Remember'.²⁴⁵ Later we take turns splashing in the shallows and chasing each other with abandon and ambition at a game of '*joluk tashtamai*'.²⁴⁶ Wandering off to the bushes to relieve ourselves, Roza takes a moment to confide a secret. Later, I drowsily watch a shy golden oriol busy in the tree tops. Over the next valley a group of vultures is circling. And then suddenly we realize the day is almost gone: time to pack up.

This description drops the reader in the midst of my happiest moments during fieldwork, and also on a particularly happy occasion for Roza and Maksat, their friends and

²⁴⁴ *Jarma*: drink of yoghurt mixed with fermented, sometimes malted grains such as wheat or maize. Also known as Maksim or by the commercial name 'Shoro'.

²⁴⁵ Smash hits 'Oh sisters-in-law' (*Ai Jengeler*) by Sanjar Koshbai Uлуу, Remember (*Estei Jür*) by Saikal Sadybakasov, the classic 'Swan' (*Ak kuu*) by Roza Amanova. *Ak kuu* can also be read as 'white melody'.

²⁴⁶ Everyone squats in a circle, one person walks around behind their backs and drops a *joluk* scarf behind someone, who then has to catch them or lose their place in the circle.

children. We were at ease with each other, we shared cooking and eating good food, contemplating the lovely river, hills and flowers, chatting, singing and playing to our heart's content.²⁴⁷ The reader may also recall a similar picnic at the 'grandmother spring' *mazar*, or in Yrysbek's photos of Turkey. The scene combines elements of happiness that I want to investigate further in this chapter: the beauties of nature, appreciated through excursions and expressed in song. On one level, these are extremely common elements of enjoyment around the world, but I aim to show that there are specificities about how natural beauty is experienced and recounted. Investigating the social roles of poetry and song reveals the centrality of *arman* (longing, regret) both for people and places in Kyrgyz pop and folk genres, which suggest a strong correlation to the theme of nostalgia discussed in section II. I ask in how far the romantic imagery of nature used in love songs reflects 'love of nature'. I set this discussion in the context of parties, since this is where such songs are performed and heard most frequently. Attention to celebrating, in social gatherings, through art, also balances the focus on work in the last chapter. It helps to explain other facets of what work is *for*.

There were other celebrations and moments of conviviality where I was much less comfortable than at Roza's picnic.²⁴⁸ Although this is a rather common experience for fieldworkers, my discomfort points to divergences in what I and my Kyrgyz hosts and guests thought a) proper and b) enjoyable. I want to end the thesis on a joyous note, to counteract the misery prevalent in so many ethnographies of the post-socialist region. I argue that consciously reflecting on human striving –and success in striving– for well-being is just as important as the more common social science focus on solving problems and avoiding suffering. I also want to underline that my Kyrgyz interlocutors were usually people of great resilience, people who know well how to create and express happiness. Therefore, this chapter analyzes celebration and *is* a celebration.

²⁴⁷ I would have chosen to do some very similar things on a Scottish Sunday, though I would have walked up a hill rather than collecting wild plants for bottling, and would not have sung with others. I sometimes think of 'nature' as my 'temple' (as a place, rather than institution). Being in nature means a 'break' for me. I know the picnic was a welcome break for Roza too, but I think she would be quite bemused by my description of this as some kind of secular pilgrimage.

²⁴⁸ For example, for a long time I felt awkward at funerals because I could not make the right crying sounds to convey sympathy and sadness. My own instinct in the face of grief is to be very quiet. I was also not used to the *length* of parties: one can easily be involved in sitting together, eating and so on for twelve hours or so, which unlike most other guests, I often found exhausting and boring.

The question of the virtuous *and* happy life has in fact been running quietly through each of the preceding chapters. The reader is already familiar with the qualities of health, wealth, *tazalyk* and ‘Kyrgyznes’ that make people glad to be on summer pastures. I also addressed the aspirations of *kul’tura* and seeking a quality of life identified as modern. We have seen how dams radiate power as political cornerstones of regional state power and modernization plans, controllers of water, the most *taza* of substances. Further, *mazars* have appeared as places where good behaviour and faith is rewarded with blessings and well-being. I have examined nostalgia for the late Soviet era as a way of valuing past efforts and as a challenge to present leaders to provide a basic level of security and wealth. We are familiar with rhetoric on work that emphasizes it as the only legitimate way to satisfy material and non-material desires such as dignity.

What makes people feel good in Kyrgyzstan? Is this ‘feeling good’ about emotion, morality, or does one entail the other? The wide-eyed delight with which Saikal Apa or Alimkhan Apa remember living on mountain pastures, the abandon with which we played party games by the river, the pride and satisfaction hosts and guests feel at a generous feast: these are all points of life when ‘good’ means joyful rather than virtuous. This last chapter looks at moral geography less in terms of *virtues* like *tazalyk* or work that I discussed earlier, and more in terms of the good life as *happiness*. Despite Rosaldo’s caveat that people do not always describe most thickly what matters to them most, that these can be the very things people are silent about (Rosaldo 1983: 2), I want to take both practices like picnics and love songs featuring swans and mountains as an indication of value. I look both to events (parties) and to poetry and song (and their part in such parties) to trace Kyrgyz ways of creating and conveying the things that make life worth living. As I enquire into definitions and experiences of pleasure, joy, value and beauty, I do not wish to suggest that everybody I met defined or experienced happiness in the same way. And yet I will show that there are conventions about what poetry and song do, how they praise people and natural beauties, and what a really good party does, that someone like Roza made their own. Conversely, of course these popular forms of enjoyment only exist because someone decides they are worth recreating- or modifying. My perspective here is similar to the ‘repertoires’ of how to talk about the past that I described in chapters 5 and 6. There are many kinds of enjoyment I cannot go into here such as the preciousness of children, the delight at going to a prestigious

place abroad (see chapter 6), the interest of TV, the excitement of horse games and posh cars, romantic secrets, pride in prosperity and wielding authority (see chapters 6 and 7).²⁴⁹

All through this thesis, I have introduced poetry and song texts. The reader has encountered poetry about Soviet dam-building and the beauty (or otherwise) of the dam reservoir compared to sacred lake Yssyk-Kul. I presented poetry praising mountain pastures as well as funeral laments. I have however not contextualized these pieces in people's sense of what poetry and song are and do, in social relations and activities. Like toasts, songs are an essential part of any celebration. In the following, I use recordings of songs from a variety of settings: formal and informal celebrations, requested recordings of people's own songs, songs I sang with children to pass the time and popular songs from the radio, TV and internet.

Basso has shown that songs and poetry can fashion a direct link between human emotions, language and land (Basso 1984: 23). Basso argues for examining indigenous theories of how language works, in order to understand what people *do* with it. He argues that in order to understand the meaning of landscape, one must study language and land together (Basso 1990: 134-136). The following discussion goes a little way towards answering what a Kyrgyz theory of language, or at least poetry and song in relation to natural beauty, might be.

Goodness = Happiness = Beauty?

I came up against quite a few problems in attempting to write about joy: firstly, it is as hard to write descriptively or analytically of joy as it is to write of people having a rest, an issue I raised in chapter 7. Secondly, at first glance anthropological literature on happiness or joy seemed extraordinarily scarce. Ethnographies of 'the good life' seem more usually framed in terms of virtue rather than pleasure. This may be a consequence of two related tendencies. Firstly, the tendency to see social science and the humanities as a problem-solving device that attracts both intellectual curiosity and funding. How could happiness count as an intellectual puzzle? And yet, the *pursuit* of happiness pre-occupies countless minds: policy-makers, philosophers, psychologists and regular punters.

Secondly, anthropologists may be suffering from the preconception that the contented have no story to tell or that it is a frivolous indulgence to study what looks unproblematic.

²⁴⁹ The question of the good life in Kyrgyzstan has been approached from other directions, on ways of making a living by Sanghera (2007, 2008), how people bring up their children (Bunn 2000), on concepts of law and justice (Beyer 2010) and leadership (Liu 2002).

One sometimes also encounters the fear that analysing joy and beauty will somehow diminish them. Are social scientists inhibited in writing about happiness? Certainly, recent anthropology of the post-socialist region has given enormous attention to suffering, precipitated by a simultaneous crisis in meaning and economy associated with the collapse of the USSR. I have already commented on the elegiac tone of much of this body of literature, evident in titles such as *Post-Soviet chaos: violence and dispossession in Kazakhstan* (Nazpary 2002), *Marx went away but Karl stayed behind* (Humphrey 1998), and *Everything was forever until it was no more* (Yurchak 2007). The trend is an understandable response to very real crises and as a critique of policy-making in the region by authoritarian leaders, the EU and large development agency agendas (Verdery and Chari 2009: 9).²⁵⁰

It seems inevitable to react to this formative generation of studies by taking a different tack, and this is indeed apparent in some recent publications (e.g. Louw 2007). There is also a better intellectual argument for studying happiness explicitly: it advances understanding of what actually makes people happy, beyond the avoidance of unpleasantness or pain. It undoubtedly allows for a more balanced view of human life (Thin 2009: 26 and 36). As I argued in chapter 1, it grounds any consideration of morality. I agree with Sanghera (2008: 2) that considering what *kind* of value, beauty or happiness people seek goes a long way in explaining their life-choices.

Positive emotions are rarely explicitly dealt with in anthropology. Descriptions of happiness are most explicit in visions of ‘lost Eden’ such as Turnbull’s *Forest People* (1984) or Sahlins’ *Original Affluent Society* (1988) (Thin 2009: 24). A recent influential publication on the *Anthropology of Love and Anger* (Overing and Passes 2000) also deals exclusively with the emotions and good life of indigenous groups. Like ‘work’, ‘happiness’ usually appears implicitly, for example in discussions of personhood, economy or cosmology (e.g. Finke 2004, Humphrey and Onon 1998, Ferguson 1999, Vitebsky 2005). Recent publications such as Mathews and Izquierdo (2009), or Corsin Jimenez (2008) do tackle the topic head on. Mathews and Izquierdo argue there is no single human sense of happiness, although there are common basics (painlessness, love, meaningfulness) (2009: 1). Happiness is conceived, expressed and experienced differently – as my failure to fully appreciate Kyrgyz parties

²⁵⁰ I have already pointed out the intriguing prevalence of the theme of morality in post-socialist literature. This focus likely picks up informants’ concerns. The drawback is that morality appears most often as disagreeable duties rather than enjoyment, a sense that being good is *hard*. This sense may derive from a legacy of Christian and Socialist sacrifice.

demonstrates. Some of these differences revolve around the variable emphasis on short-term or long-term gratification, identifying happiness as a goal for self or group, in this world or the next, as ecstasy or calm (Thin 2009: 33-5). Mathews and Izquierdo advocate ‘soft’ comparisons that look at the subtle variations in conceiving and attempting to live the good life (in their parlance ‘well-being’, i.e. ‘*the optimal state for individuals, groups and the world*’, Mathews and Izquierdo 2009: 5).

Of course the question of the differences, if there are any, between goodness and happiness, pleasure and virtue has a long pedigree, involving thinkers from Plato to Simmel. How to disaggregate joy? Recent social science articulations include attempts to measure international levels of happiness (Veenhoven 2007, Glatzer 2000), the question whether happiness is a universal concept and whether it is really what everyone has a right to strive for, as the American Declaration of Independence suggests (Lu and Gilmour 2004). Does the word even translate well? Wierzbicka suggests that *bonheur* for example, or the Russian *schast’e* are not graduated, like happiness in English, of which you can have more or less: they are peaks (2004:39).

As for beauty, the last pole in the ‘big three’: it is not my aim here to construct a Kyrgyz theory of aesthetics. In the context of music, poetry and landscape however, we have already seen several pointers towards elements of a specific appreciation of value, for example that mountain pastures are appreciated for the combination of wealth, health and beauty that they embody and make possible. But that is not the whole story. This chapter seeks to give a much less ‘economic’ rationale for the ubiquity of nature imagery in song and poetry. While certainly linguistically, Kyrgyz distinguishes between beauty (*koozduk, suluuluk*) and goodness or virtue (*jakshylyk*), I will attempt to point out connections between them, as well as between different *kinds* of beauty.

Happiness as Language or Emotion

So far, I have switched freely between the terms ‘happiness’, ‘joy’ and ‘the good life’. I feel justified in doing this in English, since joy denotes a particular peak, a certain emotional intensity, whereas happiness can be more mundane, spread out as in ‘a happy childhood’ or ‘good life’. How do English ideas of ‘happiness’, ‘joy’ and ‘goodness’ translate into Kyrgyz?

In everyday Kyrgyz, it is quite rare to hear the words *kubanich* or *shattik* (joy, delight, gladness) outside formal good wishes. *Bakyt*, (happiness/luck) is something one regularly wishes on others and the word appears in many names: *Baktygul* (happy flower) or Bakytbek (happy man). In contexts other than making wishes, people are more likely to say ‘*maga jagat*’ or ‘*men jakshy köröim*’ (‘I like it, it pleases or suits me’). They are more likely to talk about something being pleasing, pleasant or loving something (*yrakat-*, *cüüü-*) rather than about joy or enjoyment (*jyrgal*). *Jakshy* (good) is used perhaps even more often and variedly than in English. In both languages the term ‘good’, so deceptively simple and so widely used, is capable of encompassing a breadth of meaning from ‘correct’, to ‘virtuous’ and ‘enjoyable’. ‘Goodness’ (*jakshylyk*) does not immediately evoke much of an emotional dimension, it is more an expression of approval, can range from ‘ok’ to super. Nevertheless, *jakshylyk* can *experientially* include sentiments ranging from delight to quiet satisfaction and contentment, relief or hope, mirth or comfort. What this chapter deals with is the content of this *jakshylyk*. I focus particularly on this ‘goodness’ as emotion, since I discuss specific emotions in poetry and song.

It was an emotion, love of mountains and nature that made me try to study other people’s relationship to their environment in Kyrgyzstan. But how does *love* of something - isn’t it even embarrassing to admit to such an emotion, in an academic analytical mode? - translate into action, be it the intellectual engagement of a thesis, or singing about mountains and using them in a particular way? I still struggle occasionally with the sense that enjoyment is not a ‘legitimate’ motivation, that I should rather be galvanized into scholarly action by a less ‘frivolous’ desire to understand and relieve suffering.

Talk of happiness, more so than of the past or work, leads us quickly into the anthropology of emotion and psychology, and from there to personhood and morality. It is clear that there are cultural differences in the number of emotions clearly identified, what they mean and their ‘management techniques’ (Heelas 2007: 11).²⁵¹ I follow Wulff in considering human emotions a blend of universally shared feelings and culturally shaped, individually unique, meanings. Emotions lie somewhere between the units of body and soul, the personal and collective, action and thought (Wulff 2007: 5-8). This rather fuzzy idea allows me to treat emotions both as stuff and as processes that mediate between an individual and others (Lock and Schepher-Hughes in Csordas 1994: 14). Retaining ‘fuzziness’ also makes sense in addressing the thorny question of the relationship between collective

²⁵¹ Classic ethnographies of emotion include Briggs 1970, Rosaldo 1980, Schieffelin 2005.

celebration, individual emotion and conventional expression of emotion in song and poetry, as I will elaborate below. In the following, I will concentrate on happiness as a relational and social experience, as something people create, as well as experience.

I now return to picnicking and other forms of celebrating together. The frequency and intensity of formal social gatherings in Toktogul reveals forms of conviviality that are highly valued, and that people seek out in their lives as part of a good and happy way of being. Following the discussion of the language of happiness initiated above, I discuss toasts as a way of revealing what people (conventionally, publicly) wish for each other. I also offer the following description of a Kyrgyz small-town birthday party in order to situate songs, and to pick out the similarities between singing and other social activities such as blessings and toasts in honouring others.

Party, Party!

In April 2007, my friend Nargiza invited me to her mother Gümüşkhan's 60th birthday party in the county town. I had never met her mother, but Nargiza is the daughter-in-law in the family that first asked me to stay in Bel Aldy. Having attended a 'quality' Russian language school in the district centre, she was one of the few young women I could talk to easily when I first arrived. Nargiza's plumpness belies how energetically she runs her husband's household - and sometimes, his affairs.²⁵² On the day of the party I take an ornate cream cake, a Russian translation of Walter Scott stories and a large bank note as gifts. Having walked the grid of Toktogul's suburbia, I turn into Gümüşkhan's yard, but am waved at by a man with a video camera: can I retrace my steps and advance again, please? A trickle of guests arrives behind me, picking their way across the mud in polished shoes. The men have mostly come in suits and *kalpaks*, the women are in two-pieces with long skirts and carefully matched head scarves.

Nargiza asks for my news. She is tired, for she has been helping with preparations for three days already, preparing food along with other young female relatives and neighbours.²⁵³

²⁵² I already introduced Nargiza's life history in chapter 5

²⁵³ She waves away my offers of help: 'no, no, you are a guest'. But no-one stops me when I chip in later. It is perfectly alright for a young woman like me to help if I like. New acquaintances sometimes comment approvingly that I am *jakshy kyz*, 'a good girl' because of this. Were I a young female Kyrgyz researcher, the expectation to help out would be much greater, and if I were a relative, it would be taken for granted. It is possible for me to move between roles: honoured guest and young female relative. Sometimes this is awkward,

In the kitchens, platters of colourful salads are being put together. A man-high samovar under the apple tree is stoked by a couple of uncles, keeping the party well-supplied with tea. Now is the time to stew the sheep the men of the family butchered earlier.

As discussed in chapter 7, generous hospitality is often pronounced an ethnic marker of the Kyrgyz, the subject of numerous proverbs. Despite the exhausting care that goes into hosting, women usually take great pride in it and tell me they enjoy having guests. As well as relieving boredom, and the satisfaction of giving, knowing how to host people properly is crucial to 'being a good woman'.²⁵⁴ It is also a central part of being well brought-up to know how to be a good guest (Light 2008). Opportunities for proving a generous host and well-mannered guest are numerous. Feasts happen in most people's lives once a week or so, perhaps more often in the spring with its many holidays and the autumn wedding season, at other times less often. There are weddings at private houses and in cafés, parties celebrating the arrival of a new-born (*Beshik Toi*), *Tushoo Kesüü* to celebrate a young child's first steps,²⁵⁵ the beginning and end of Ramadan and *Kurman Ait (Eid)*, circumcisions, dowry (*sep*) handovers, the Central Asian New Year *Nooruz* on 21st of March. Celebrations like *Nooruz* that were viewed as religious were officially discouraged and less widely and grandly celebrated during the Soviet era. Some celebrations, such as the move to spring pastures are no longer observed (Abramzon 1971: 74). Others such as *Nooruz* have revived. Yet others were introduced as modern Soviet celebrations: Labour Day, class anniversaries, Teachers' Day, Women's Day, Veterans' Day and a combined Christmas and New Year are still widely observed. Occasions for good food and conviviality, if not for 'congratulations' are weekly neighbourhood parties on summer pastures (*sherine*), inaugurating a new house or car, or a *Chërnaia Kassa* (Russian: 'black savings box') where women close in age take turns hosting

as when I am assigned a seat with the respected elders. On other occasions I am glad to have a quiet seat, eat good food and not have to slave away in the kitchen.

²⁵⁴ Although entertaining guests is a collaboration between wife and husband, or other male and female relatives, I have never heard of a man attempting a formal invitation on his own. If men want to socialize on their own, they tend to go to a cafe or bar, or hunker down by the roadside with a cigarette, a drink and maybe a pack of cards. Gümüşkhan's husband went shopping for the party at the local bazaar. He slaughtered the sheep and fed the fire, welcomed his guests and presided over the table, encouraging people to eat and drink.

²⁵⁵ *Tushoo Kesüü* means 'the cutting of the hobbles'. The child has a string tied round their legs, as if it was being hobbled. Children, women and men race each other for prizes, and the winner cuts the child's hobbles. The hope is that the child will have the strength of a fast runner and not 'fall down' in life.

each other once a month.²⁵⁶ It is easy to tell if a party (*toi*) is in progress by the jumble of shoes in the porch.

As we have seen, especially in the early summer, groups of friends or school classes like to go on a *pokhod* to a nearby beauty spot. Funerals and remembrance wakes are also a frequent occasion for visiting (their length and elaboration was a cause for state concern in Soviet times, and still is now). Of course these sober occasions do not feature joyous dancing, singing or toasting, but they do offer particularly lavish hospitality and gifts for and from the grieving family.

²⁵⁶ The hostess receives an agreed sum of money from each of her friends, which she can use for special household expenses such as a new tea service or materials for making bedding.



Figure 24: A host selecting meat portions at a wedding feast

At Gümüşkhan's party, the women of the house have spread tablecloths in each room of the house with an abundant and beautifully patterned spread. The guests settle in order of seniority on the long mats.²⁵⁷ The house fills with relatives (lineage members and in-laws) of all ages, classmates of long ago, neighbours and colleagues: there must be at least seventy guests and helpers under Gümüşkhan's roof tonight. We sip at our tea, while the youngest daughter-in-law attentively encourages us to drink and eat plenty from the end of the table: '*Chai ichkile, jegile!*' At first we pick appreciatively at the beautiful spread of crisp fried bread (*borsook*) to dip in jam or honey, the brittle coils of eggy fried dough (*chakchak*), the salads, small plates of nuts and dried fruit, biscuits and sweets, or baskets of fruit in an atmosphere of polite restraint. We are not all familiar with each other, but as the hours wear on, the small groups of people quietly exchanging news relax into toasts and jokes around the table. Before long, Gümüşkhan's uncle Akylbek has taken to her cousin Kenje, a lady with fabulous green eyes and is trading outrageous and witty banter with her. I feel flushed and looking around the table, see the colour has risen in other people's cheeks too. Only the young *kelin* guarding the thermos and food supply is too busy and shy to drink and joke in front of her elders.

Picnics and birthday parties have much in common in that they involve sitting together over lots of good food, singing and toasting, games and dances. But the tone of such events can be very different. The picnic I attended was a time of comfortable relaxation for all, with few obligations. The birthday party I attended on the other hand, might have been very enjoyable for many in the hosting and guesting party, but it also involved great effort, etiquette and duties. At the picnic, I could be sure that everyone who came wanted to share some pleasurable time together. At the birthday party, I could not. There were bits that we all appreciated as 'good', 'proper', such as saying a good toast. Other parts such as drinking and dancing were the highlights for some, an awkward imposition for others. Many of Gümüşkhan's relatives probably felt obliged to attend, feeling their relationship and position in the world would suffer if they did not, and yet worrying about how to afford a good-

²⁵⁷ There is a debate about whether men and women should be seated in separate rooms, with stricter Muslims advocating separation. Currently the only time the separation is strictly observed around Toktogul is at funerals. If there are lots of guests, the elderly will be seated separately from the young folk as part of the hierarchy at table: they get the nicest rooms. This also encourages people to be comfortable, as the young folk need to watch their behaviour less, can get more drunk and have more of a laugh. The elders might feel more comfortable too, among their own age-mates, since friendships are assumed to work best between contemporaries (quite a narrow range in years).

enough present and time off work. I certainly heard plenty such worries and reluctance to attend on other occasions. On the other hand, celebrations like this relieve the tedium of everyday life, provide excellent (nearly) free food and a great opportunity to have a rest, chat, sing and so on.

While these feasts often started as a real exercise in propriety, if the mood was good as at Gümüşkhan's birthday, or the alcohol flowed freely enough, such occasions could turn into all-night junkets with silliness of all kinds – and the odd argument. The celebrations I attended were both ways of cultivating dutiful interaction and confirming common bonds (described in chapter 5 as *birimdik*: unity or *yntymak*: good relations), as well as occasions for experiencing joy: generosity, humour, ecstatic dancing, the buzz of strong liquor, the pleasure of seeing old friends and relatives and meeting new ones. Parties more often than not straddle the 'good life' as virtue and as enjoyment, having both a place for dignity and pride, or playfulness. No doubt like me, my fellow guests and hosts varied in where on this spectrum they would pinpoint themselves, from moment to moment, occasion to occasion. Parties both produced momentary pleasure, and the long-term life-sustaining 'socio-economics' of helping each other with chores, in times of grief, finding jobs or money.

Part of the ambiguity around the moods of parties was quite often anxiously discussed in relation to alcohol. Alcohol fuelled most parties and created moods where abandon, flirtation, mischievous humour and sensuality as well as anger could thicken the air. Many people clearly enjoyed it, while the mood lasted. The same people could later deplore the obligation to serve and drink alcohol on social occasions, pointing to the negative effects on people's purses, scandalous behaviour including violence and wide-spread alcohol addiction, as well as a sense of shame about Muslims imbibing alcohol. On one occasion, a (drunken) acquaintance conspiratorially asked me not to write about the drinking habits of Kyrgyz people. However, since the Kyrgyz are not alone in the world in using alcohol both as a social lubricant and drug, I do not feel uncomfortable in revealing that they, along with other Muslims and non-Muslims, enjoy this substance, and have problems with it too.

Toasts

In between bouts of eating Gümüşkhan's husband Aibek asks us, in order of seniority, to say a toast. Everyone hushes as they take up their attentively refilled glasses to listen to the speaker. As usual, the men stick to vodka, while some of the women have chosen

sweet fortified wine instead. It is not possible to sit at table and not join in the many toast. Gümüşkhan's uncle Akylbek, a man with watery eyes and an impressive drooping moustache is the first to say a toast. He sniffs and with a serious expression, turning slightly towards our host, eyes fixed on the tablecloth, intones a toast. '*Daima ak tasmaldyn üstündö, achyk asmandyn astynda. Cizge jakshy den sooluk kaalaim. Uzun ömür bolsun, ishteringizge iigilik bolsun.*' ('May there always be a white tablespread to sit at, under a clean sky. I wish you good health. May you have a long life and success').²⁵⁸

Toasting is something of an art. As we have seen in the discussion of *mazars* and of the evil eye, thoughts, spoken wishes and intentions are powerful. As Akylbek continues his toast, it becomes obvious that he is something of a master: he knows how to create a personalized, graceful and sincere toast, to convey gratitude and benevolence to all. Other people are much more shy, stick to routine formulae and want to get the performance over as soon as possible. Our host Aibek acknowledges Akylbek's good wishes with a serious thank you and adds a small politeness in return. Everyone around the table appreciatively nod their heads and murmur politely. This is not the time to take the Mickey: rip-roarious jokes are kept for later.

At the end of his speech, Akylbek looks round the table: '*Meili, alingizdar*': 'So, please drink up now'. He drains his glass and pops a proffered bite of meat (*zakuska*) into his mouth for afters. Everyone else around the table politely and persuasively encourages their neighbour to down the drink, while showing restraint themselves. I try just taking a sip rather than downing the shot, but my neighbour presses me to '*do it properly, show respect to the host and speaker*'.²⁵⁹ Later in the evening, Kenje is a little tipsy and rambles on with her toast, excitable and loud. Her neighbour whispers to her to get on with it and firmly presses Kenje's glass and a titbit into her hand, which she had put aside in her excited gesticulating. We eat our way slowly through courses of fried potatoes and meat (*kuurdak*) followed by dumplings (*manty*), meat and potato stew and a delicious rice, carrot and meat dish (*plov*). The main course will arrive late at night.

²⁵⁸ As discussed in chapter 2, the colour white is associated with good things, purity and luck. Though they are called by a Russian name ('*tost*'), these speeches have the qualities of blessings (*bata*), which is also what one hopes to acquire as a pilgrim to a *mazar*.

²⁵⁹ For a woman it is alright to be stubborn about this and limit her intake. This is not impossible, but harder to do as a man. No lady will admit to liking alcohol, unless you abandon all decorum and no longer mind about your reputation. But others may tease and gossip that really, someone is quite partial to a tippie.

Central Asian Music: what, by and for whom

While we wait for the next course there is a bout of singing. Gümüşkhan starts a game of *yr kese*: she fills a drinking bowl with leftover juices, tea, sweet papers and other rubbish. If you are handed the bowl, you have to perform a song. When it is Nargiza' turn, she searches her memory for the text of a current hit and, prompted by some other guests, she sings:

*'When I look at your picture
It reminds me of the flowers blooming on the shores of the lake.
Do you remember those evening conversations
Sweet words bursting from our hearts?
...
Countless stars were looking only at us
It was as if they were pulling us away from each other.
We played and laughed for a long time, my dear
Till the dawn and white sun rose.'*²⁶⁰

Nargiza sits quite still, all her artistry is in her voice, which swoops and carries a lover's sadness into long-drawn out endnotes. Her audience whoop '*ya*', clap and comment '*eei, she's got a nice voice*'. Like toasting, a song is both an offering and a performance that some people are very skilled in. As the bowl makes its rounds, there are elegies of longing for the homeland, golden childhoods and lovers but also songs honouring parents. One recent hit is a teasing song about female in-laws (*Ai Jengeler*); another is the sad song of a young man in prison, writing a regretful letter to his ill old father.²⁶¹

In this section, I will examine how Kyrgyz poets and singers consider their work and what motivates them to compose. I also examine the social role of poets and singers, their relation to state institutions and policies in the recent past and present. All these aspects finally contribute to an understanding of what Kyrgyz poetry and music are *for*, what they express and what their effect is. I draw on popular as well as personal songs and poetry from the Toktogul region. Essentially, the kinds of songs I discuss are poems put to music - often

²⁶⁰ '*Esindebi*' (Do You Remember?) by Ryspai Abdykadyrov.

²⁶¹ '*Ataga kat*' by Artyk jana Sapar.

new words to an old tune. I concentrate on lyrical love poetry and songs to consider what role nature imagery and ‘*arman*’ (yearning) play in them. There are many other forms and topics of song that I cannot address, such as those contemplating other feelings, parents, friendship or the seasons.²⁶² I discuss when and what people decide to sing about, what they do not sing about, what is possible and good to say in song, and how this relates to ideas and experiences of beauty and goodness. I discuss funeral laments in relation to lyrical songs and poetry and point to their surprising similarities with blessings and toasts.²⁶³

Because everyone is called on to contribute to entertaining at gatherings, a musical education is rather important and thankfully, rather easy to acquire. I was often asked whether I had learnt such essentials as making bread properly - and singing a Kyrgyz song or two. Singing is cultivated at school, where practicing for recitations, solo and group performances at school festivities, are an integral part of the curriculum. Some people have song collections, that they might get out at parties (just the text, no notation), either published or copied into exercise books with pictures of stars. Many teenagers avidly follow Kyrgyz pop stars and dream of going to a conservatory and then becoming stars. A very large portion of TV time is taken up with reviews of Kyrgyz *estrada* singers and much radio air time is given to callers-in dedicating a song (not sung themselves) to a long list of relatives and friends.²⁶⁴ Thus, most people learn music from a combination of hearing songs from other people at parties, from cheap cassettes, DVDs, TV shows and school performances.

The strength of national pop culture is striking: Uzbek, Kazakh and Russian bands come a clear second and European or American pop lags behind these in popularity. In the context of people performing a lot themselves, they are of course much less likely to choose an English, or even Russian-language song. Interestingly, the popularity of Kyrgyz stars is quite recent, galvanized particularly by the folk singer Roza Amanova. The generation coming of age in the late Soviet period preferred imported Western or Russian pop and rock,

²⁶² I would like to thank the musician Aizada Osmonbekova and poets Aida Egemberdieva, Roza Mukasheva, Karabai Ramanov, Erkin Özübekov, Osmonbek Jekshenkulov and Turusbek Madilbaiev for sharing their knowledge and views so generously.

²⁶³ As mentioned earlier, I have been helped enormously with translations by Baktygul Tulebaeva. I have tried to be faithful to the content, imagery and tone of the texts, mostly giving up the ‘sound’ and elegance of the Kyrgyz.

²⁶⁴ *Estrada*, to be precise *estradnaia musika*: popular music, used in the Soviet Union since the mid-twentieth century to denote the ideologically sound *pendant* to ideologically dubious Western Pop and Rock (Klenke, unpublished).

and still listen to this music on car journeys for example. But Russian or Western pop is rarely brought out for parties or singing.²⁶⁵

I have already spoken of the reputation the Toktogul region has for its singers (both pop and bardic), and how its name honours Toktogul Satylganov, the ‘democrat bard’. I was astonished to find how many of my friends and acquaintances composed songs or poetry themselves. It seemed a rather respected skill, both producing texts others could read, and performing them. Mostly people composed for their own enjoyment, or, if they had the gift, to praise other people. It was easy to share a song you had made up one hot afternoon while mending the sheets. There was little of the self-consciousness (based on expectations of high art?) people from my own background would display at showing their prose or verse. There was little sense of it being private, not to be revealed.²⁶⁶

Music and poetry was frequently something to gift to other people. Often songs were dedicated to whoever the party was celebrating. Clearly, singing was an important component of conviviality, of celebrating together. In this sense, performing songs is a social activity and bond that only sporadically appears in Northern Europe, in carolling, specialist choirs, and other sub-cultures such as the Scouts or karaoke enthusiasts. Apart from the context of Karaoke, songs in all these groups are usually performed *together*, unlike at Kyrgyz parties.

Genres, Performers and the Music of the State

One striking aspect of Kyrgyz songs and poetry is that there is but one word to cover both: *yr*. If one wants to specify that the poetic text is not sung, one must resort to the Russian *poezia*. The poetry I came across was often given to me as an appropriate gift, something to read at home rather than something to recite as a party performance.

The prominent Soviet musicologist Victor V. Beliaev lists a large number of genres in Kyrgyz ‘national’ music (as he called it), based around songs, with some komuz and mouth harp melodies. He maintains that most folk songs are work songs, those of shepherds, threshers, hunters, spinners. He also notes lullabies, satires, wedding songs, bride laments as

²⁶⁵ Baktygul Tulebaeva (personal communication) and Yurchak 2007. There are also old Soviet ‘hymns’ that most people, even those born years after the demise of the USSR will know and occasionally, sing.

²⁶⁶ Because of the weakness of copyright law, people trying to make a living from art could be rather more circumspect about sharing their work, at least with new acquaintances.

well as laments proper and lyrical songs.²⁶⁷ Beliaev distinguishes *akyns* (bards), who unlike the simple singer (*yrchy*) often compose as well as perform. They are now considered a different kind of artist from *manaschis*, but this is likely a division created during Soviet rule (Bunn 2000: 147). Beliaev further lists genres such as the panegyric (*maktoo*), denunciations (*kordoo*), congratulatory songs (*kuttuktoo*) and those dedicated to someone (*arnoo*) (Beliaev 1975: 2-7). Much religious teaching was done through didactic songs (*sanat* and *nasiat*), historically this was also the case in Uzbekistan (Levin 1996: 40-42). The ethnographer Abramzon lists similar genres, but after mentioning work songs (for wiling away the time and keeping wolves away during the night watch), he gives pride of place to lyrical songs telling of personal losses (Abramzon 1971: 341). Apart from work songs, all these genres are current and recognizable in the texts I discuss.²⁶⁸ We have seen that ‘traditional’ genres cover a wide range of themes and social situations (work, contests, funerals). More frequently than mainstream Euro-American pop, Central Asian texts cover a wide range of subjects such as respect for parents or the hard lives of women. Kyrgyz pop stars also regularly address the question of being a good Muslim, a good person.²⁶⁹

Nowadays, wedding singers and bards asked to sing at parties such as Gümüşkhan’s are fairly well remunerated, but competition is high and employment precarious, as in most other sectors of the Kyrgyz economy.²⁷⁰ This is in stark contrast to the generous state employment of musicians and institutional support they received in the Soviet era. Like Uyghur, Uzbek or Kazakh folk and pop artists, they must now rely on clients and private patronage. There are also some indirect opportunities for income: one local poet published a book in praise of our village: the larger the sheep you contributed for his labour, the longer the poem about you became. Another well-known local writer (who still had to pay for publications out of his own pocket) was summoned to the president’s administration to boost

²⁶⁷ I heard few songs addressing work. Perhaps this is a reflection of Socialist ideology in classification (classifying songs by when they are sung, rather than content, as I would do) or it is possibly a change in fashion. Roza Mukasheva and Aida Egemberdieva thought the first scenario more likely.

²⁶⁸ Another genre is comedy, ‘*kuuduldar*’ (comedians) specialize in satire and witty poetry. Part of the reason for there being little of this in popular music and volumes of poetry are the negative repercussions such critique can have on the artist: one poet said he’d written some ‘angry’ poetry, but thought it best not to publish it. On the other hand, praise songs (*maktoo*, *arnoo*) are occasionally a feature of state or opposition events.

²⁶⁹ E.g. ‘*Rasulullah*’ by Emil Baltagulov, ‘*Bul Düinö*’ (This World) by Ilyas Abdyrazakov.

²⁷⁰ Wedding singers have a long history in Central Asia, as a caste in Uzbekistan (cf. Levin 1996, Sultanova 2005). Most performing bands have more male than female performers, probably because young women are unlikely to be allowed to tour the country by protective relatives.

their cultural standing. One big difference between poets and singers is that, with the exception of Chingiz Aitmatov and perhaps the philosopher Choyun Ömüräliev, there are no stars among poets and prose writers. Pop singers, but not traditional *akyns* or *manaschis*, may see their art as a career.

The state has far less control over the arts than in the Soviet era, and other agencies such as UNESCO have only partially stepped into the funding gap. Unlike the musicians and poets of Xinjiang (Harris 2002: 266-8) and Uzbekistan (Levin 1996, Adams 2009, Klenke unpublished), state censorship has recently not wielded a very heavy hand over Kyrgyz performers. Nevertheless, the debate on what *kind* of music to preserve or foster is not over.

Throughout the Soviet era, state influence over music, over how and what kind of music was taught and considered ‘progressive’ was highly politicized. Ideally, music was at once entertainment and propaganda. The Central Asian didactic song genres must have suited Communist aims well. Song writers were funded to combat feudalism, promote atheism, establish national identities, promote ‘cultural development’ and celebrate achievements according to the well-used formula ‘*national in form, socialist in content*’ (Rouland 2007: 220).

In the Soviet era, collectors recorded all sorts of music, but publication was censored. Music was cleansed of ‘vestiges’ (*perezhitki*) such as religious content, ideas and styles of the courts, and a spirit of ‘pessimism and melancholy’. Old melodies were instrumented for Western-style orchestras (Djumaev 1993: 43-4). Part of the process of creating a national music was to blend regional differences. Indeed, where Levin finds strong and long-standing regional traditions in Uzbek music in the 1990s (Levin 1996: xv), Beliaev writing twenty years earlier does not mention these and concentrates on the ‘national musics’ of Central Asia. These days, there are two genres within this: traditional music played on traditional instruments by performers in traditional costumes and pop, which often uses old texts and sets them to new melodies.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Since epics have been set apart from other forms of art and in state policy defined as (preferably unchanging) tradition, *manaschis* who base their innovations on *arbak* inspired dreams now have difficulty getting recognition for this as legitimate innovation (van der Heide 2008: 148-9).

What can a Song reveal about the Singer?

We have seen above some of the forces affecting what and how you sing that are beyond the reach of individual creativity and self-expression. If on many occasions, one is expected to sing, if there is a repertoire of what to sing about and how to do it, does this mean one cannot deduce anything about an individual's or group's desires from songs? Or is song nevertheless a 'window to the soul'? The question can be framed more generally as the question of language: all languages are highly conventional in order to be understood, and yet individual in how elements like words are selected to express oneself. Not only studies of landscape often leave the impression that there is nothing to study but language, nothing but representations that are analytically accessible, and that experience and emotion, both collective and individual, are inaccessible. I would like to follow Thomas Csordas in putting a little more trust in the relationship between language and experience. As he puts it: '*language gives access to world and derives from it*' (Csordas 1994: 10). Or as Bunn puts it from another viewpoint: '*When working within a tradition, this does certainly not prohibit you expressing yourself. ... No two Kyrgyz carpets are the same, but they are unmistakably Kyrgyz carpets*' (Bunn 2000: 335-336). The obverse question is in how far our experience of the world is shaped through language, for example through nature imagery in romantic songs.²⁷² Several ethno-musicology studies have asked how music produces effects, *acts* rather than simply mirroring or expressing the status quo (Feld 1990, Stobart 2006, Magowan 2007).

To my mind, Lila Abu-Lughod has dealt very skilfully with this question. Her ethnography of Bedouin poetry also surprised me with many features I recognized from Toktogul. In *Veiled Sentiments: honor and poetry in a Bedouin Society*, Abu-Lughod deals with the relationship between two discourses: everyday speech, where honour is paramount and vulnerability has no place, and poetry, where sorrow is foregrounded. Abu-Lughod sees both sets of discourses as conventional in tone and yet equally 'true' (1999: 35). Her solution to this paradox is to see the two discourses as commenting on each other, though to her mind poetry ultimately enhances the value of honour, revealing that it is costly to the person, and

²⁷² I discussed a similar question in relation to oral history in chapter 6: in how far do stories correspond to lived experience?

highlights their self-mastery (1985: 257).²⁷³ She shows that poets work with conventional imagery, relying on the background knowledge of their listeners to evoke a whole field of other poems, images and sentiments, enriching rather than impoverishing what they want to express (1999: 177).

The question of why people bother with or enjoy writing poetry and songs is intimately related to what people think it is *for*. Here is what Karabai Ramanov, a prominent member of the village council, former atheist and Communist activist, doctor and writer had to say about the matter:

'For me the world of songs is more valuable than the world of things

It was given to me by God through my parents

As my happy fate

So that it remains always within me.

...

*I chose not to amass riches [or could not: *jiialbadim*]*

I did not ask wealth of anyone.

Those who offered me money for melodious songs

I refused and gave them songs for free.

I amassed songs but I did not keep them to myself

I did not lock them up so that nobody would steal them.

If they want I share the world of my songs unsparingly,

With people who appreciate it.

People's good deeds, inner worlds,

Souls, heart, understanding and minds.

These are ruled by the happiness made of wonders.

This I have shared through the world of poetry.

²⁷³By 'discourse' Abu-Lughod means a Foucauldian field in which certain things can be said and not others: 'a set of statements, verbal and nonverbal, with rules and regularities that both constructs and is patterned by social and personal reality' (Abu-Lughod 1999:186).

The world of songs is my happiness that will not leave me, my food.

If your free will is quickly occupied by inspiration [ilkham].

If your inner world is full of inspiration

You will realize extraordinary facets of the value of happiness.

(Ramanov 2008: 4)

To Karabai Ramanov, his talent for poetry is a god-given *and* ancestral gift to be shared, and he opposes himself to those who seek to make a profit from it, or do not share it generously. It has a spiritual value, it nourishes him and other people, and indeed, has a didactic role as the source of ‘*good deeds, soul ... understanding*’ and happiness.²⁷⁴ This fits a wider Central Asian conception of *akyns* and poets as philosophers, music as a cultural repository as well as essential entertainment (Bunn 2000: 292, Rouland 2007: 215). Indeed, in the pre-Soviet era, *akyns* could be diplomats, public speakers and the right hand men of rulers such as Genghis Khan. They can still have considerable political clout: Davlatmand Kholov, the most famous bard of Tajikistan, was made advisor to the president (During 2005: 156). The high profile of Uzbek pop is partly due to the government prioritizing it as a medium of state spectacle and patriotism. Certain messages are clearly influenced by the state’s rhetoric of the need to defend the motherland and militarism.²⁷⁵ One Uzbek star, Yulduz Usmanova (now exiled) wanted to ‘*raise the level of our culture*’ (quoted in Levin 1996: 82-3). Her desire is consistent with the idea of artists as moral leaders, and with Ramanov’s conception of poetry as spiritual nourishment.

I found other people than Karabai Ramanov also talked about artistic talent as something interior: the poet Erkin Özübekov explained that ‘*people feel in three ways: with words, music or pictures. I’m a poet because I feel and think differently about the world.*’ Grand-father Sultanaly, who showed great promise as a komuz player and poet in his youth, but was forbidden to continue this precarious living by his guardian, told me how one young bard had gone to see Toktogul, and had a dream in which God promised him nine sons if he

²⁷⁴There are indeed word smiths who share characteristics with healers and diviners: the *manaschi*. Levin also notes *baqshis* in northern Tajikistan calling spirits with music and healing, whereas in Uzbekistan *baqshis* are not healers, but a type of traditional musician (1996: 247). In Kyrgyzstan a *bakshy* is simply a traditional healer. It is fascinating that the *baqshy* word oscillates in meaning between healer, healer that uses song and instruments, and simply musician.

²⁷⁵Klenke unpublished and Megoran 2005:563.

would sing. But he did not, so all he was left with was a daughter. As Sultanaly commented: *'he did not sing, so everything was inside of him.'*²⁷⁶

In Kyrgyzstan, poetry is not a mode of communication restricted to confidential communication with peers, as in the Bedouin case. The didactic public role of Central Asian poets and singers contrasts markedly with the intimacy of Bedouin poetry. Whether or not they have a dream calling, anyone can make up a verse or two, and anyone can listen. Another way of appreciation song is expressed in a poem by Abai Kunanbaev (1888):

*Song opened the doors of the world to you
Song will see you off in earthly dust and mourning
Song is the eternal companion of joy on earth
So heed it keenly and value it, beloved.*²⁷⁷

Here, song is the '*companion of joy*' but also '*sees you off in earthly dust and mourning*', likely an allusion to laments. Here, song is all about emotion, the great movements of the soul and trajectory of life. Certainly Roza Mukasheva and Aida Egemberdieva also thought it natural that it was pain that pushed people to compose (personal communication). This gives us a clue as to why so many Kyrgyz songs are sad: the sadness is the reason they exist. It is a channel of publicly, recognizably and - positively - expressing suffering. This aspect of Kyrgyz poetry is very akin to what Abu-Lughod says of the Bedouin case. One Bedouin woman responded to the question why so many songs are sad: : '*She who gets what she wants and is happy, shuts up*' Another respondent said he sings to soothe himself, especially in times of trouble (Abu-Lughod 1999: 177 and 183). Yet people enjoy hearing and singing such sad songs.

In the story Sultanaly told of a young poet who failed to make sons or male descendants, songs are again a gift that one has a duty to give - if one has 'the gift'. I already mentioned how often poems and songs are dedicated to somebody, sometimes as a commission, such as Eshmatov's volume on his home village. Just like at parties, individual expression and emotion is implicated in fulfilling public acts and roles. Because words are so

²⁷⁶ Bunn notes that for any specialist skill, people might say it is 'in one's blood', but that this expression is rather about a person's personal calling, than a genetic disposition (Bunn 2000: 295 and 318). See also discussion of 'blood' in chapter 5.

²⁷⁷ Abai Kunanbaev: late 19th century Kazakh poet who promoted education and translated romantic European and Russian literature, quoted in Rouland 2007: 213.

powerful, poetry and song usually strike a positive note: speaking ill of someone is an extremely powerful thing to do, it can cause havoc and it is rare to find people doing this in public.²⁷⁸ One way of addressing ugliness, injustice or anger is instead to write in a didactic mode, as Karabai Ramanov does on the value of art over money.

The question of why the Toktogul area is so well-known for its bards and pop singers (but not *manaschis*) also goes beyond individual inspiration. I got different responses to why this might be: *'because it is in these families' blood*, *'because the water is gold, very clean'*, *'because this area speaks proper, pure Kyrgyz'*.²⁷⁹ It is also possible that Toktogul himself was the first to attract bards to the area, teaching them and helping them settle there. I will pursue one other stock answer to the source of poetic excellence - *'because our area is so beautiful'* - in the following section.

What to sing about: Nature, Romance and Arman

When I first started collecting songs, I assumed that praising birds in song, using them to represent romantic feelings, expressed something about people's relationship to actual birds, and by extension, to nature in general. It seemed obvious to me that what one values, one strives to respect, protect or take care of. However, I came to realise that things are a little more complicated than the image of birds in song translating, crudely, into not throwing stones at them. Elsewhere it is obvious that even if people admire the crystal-clear waters of coral reefs, these feelings do not necessarily translate directly into active conservation.

We used to be girls, young as the morning star

*On the icy pass near the high peak
I saw a bird, flying without fear
I used to be a young girl, bright like the morning star
Jannochka, I've changed into a grand-mother.*

...

²⁷⁸ As recent events have shown, when large numbers of people in Kyrgyzstan are really angry with government leaders, they have been very unafraid to voice this anger on the streets. These demonstrations have been highly effective in ousting two successive governments in the last five years. It would be very interesting to examine how this kind of political action relates to the kinds of interactions and art I discuss here.

²⁷⁹ All these rather flat answers relate to ideas of blood, water and purity raised in earlier chapters.

When my grandchild says 'grandmother' [maternal]

I'm so pleased, my whole body turns red

I was an elegant fresh girl, ai

I was equal to the Moon and the Sun.

Aunt Maral chose this song from a songbook at a recording session in her home. She and her husband are janitors of the technical college in the town of Kara Kul. Her father is Sultanaly, a man of great musical gifts. She said she had not sung for many years, but her granddaughters, she and I enjoyed a bout of singing, searching together for songs we liked, discussing what they meant. One striking feature of Kyrgyz song and poetry is the overwhelmingly elegiac tone, the common theme of regret and longing (*arman*), either for a beloved person, cherished places, or here, bygone youth.²⁸⁰ I will use Maral's song and other examples to inquire into what this *arman* is all about, and how it is connected to nature imagery and romantic love. I have already introduced several relevant examples in earlier chapters. Recall Alimkhan Apa's song:

The moon light is evenly spread over the Earth,

The livestock in the pasture is so fat,

Have fun when you have strength,

The youthful years of 18 will not come back!

I am sure Alimkhan Apa and Maral Eje chose these songs as appropriate to sing as grand-mothers. Maral felt it reflected something of her experience: she was indeed telling me her regret for no longer being the bright, elegant, fresh girl she once was. But she also sang of the great compensatory pleasures of beloved grandchildren that make her go all red with pleasure. Other songs invented and performed by older women spoke of the respect they received, the excellence of their daughters-in-law and husbands. Indeed, having served elders all their lives until this point, they deserved a rest.

Yearning for an absence (homeland, beloved, youth) tessellates to some extent with one prevalent attitude towards history, the nostalgia discussed in chapter 6. In song certainly, this kind of yearning is a cause for sadness, but it is not necessarily a negative feeling to be

²⁸⁰ *Arman* is a term common to many Turkic and Persian languages and also names, meanings range between dream, wish and ideal. In Kyrgyz it specifically denotes the feeling I describe here.

avoided.²⁸¹ According to Abu-Lughod, the Bedouin definition of a good poem is one that makes you cry (1999:177). *Arman* can be a sort of ‘delicious yearning’, a way of valuing romantic love, the summer pasture or homeland. Writing about picnicking by the river with Roza, I was surprised by the intensity of my sudden longing to *be there* again. Yearning, even grieving is a form of love. One might think of Maral’s song as if she was looking through a photo album of her life, recalling good times, but also taking satisfaction in the richness of her life right up to the present. The poets Aida Egemberdieva and Roza Mukasheva both thought it was yearning, the ‘*strongest movements of the heart*’ that give the impulse to compose (personal communications). Roza Mukasheva also speculated that the sadness of Kyrgyz music reflected their hard life and the frequent partings among nomads. On the other hand, if the idea of beauty has anything to do with perfection, the discrepancy between ideal and reality, then beauty can inspire sadness too (Armstrong 2007: 81).

Love of Nature?

Classics like Toktogul Satylganov’s ‘Alimkhan’, the personal compositions of people like Karabai Ramanov that I met in the Toktogul region and the hits of groups like ‘Kyz Burak’ combine *arman* with metaphors of nature to speak of people’s experience, and the emotions between them.²⁸² It is also a feature of other expressions, such as proverbs, to use very concrete imagery (donkeys, water, doorsteps) to express a general sentiment. As Maral sings of lifting off like a bird, she invokes the fearlessness and grace of a young girl. It is also striking how many texts play with images of light: comparing a young girl to the moon and sun, the beloved in the white dawn, the brightness of stars, a face like a lamp (for example in the song that Nargiza sang at the party).²⁸³ Lightning (*jark*) often stands for falling in love,

²⁸¹ It is possible that the elegiac atmosphere of Kyrgyz music is partly a reaction against the forced cheer of Soviet music policies. Rachel Harris has suggested that Uyghur music in Xinjiang is so sad and angry as a reaction to the forced cheer and satisfaction the Chinese state officially requires (Harris 2002: 273). But it might also suggest, since Central Asian music was already ‘sad’, that Socialist music policies in fact had little effect on popular music-making and taste.

²⁸² Beliaev also notes this as a feature of Kyrgyz song (1975: 7), as does Rouland in Kazakh music more recently (Rouland 2007: 223)

²⁸³ The image of light also appears about the dam in chapter 3: a poem describes the dam ‘*spreading artificial stars all over the world*’ and Lenin’s phrase ‘*bringing lights to the yurts*’. Recall also in chapter 6 Yrysbek’s description of his village as a ‘cave’ and the Russian proverb ‘*uchenie svet, a neuchenie t’ma*’ (education is light, ignorance is darkness).

and we have seen the toasting formula of wishing someone's 'sky may be open'. Like aspects of happiness, natural beauty of a certain kind also features in people's, (particularly in women's) names: Jyldyz (star), *Jarkynai* (bright moon), *Nazgul* (ray of flowers), *Gulmairam* (flower festival), *Maral* (deer), *Kunduz* (type of otter), for men *Nurjan* (soul of light) *Aibek* (moon man) or *Almaz* (diamond).²⁸⁴ *Cholpon*, the morning star *Maral* invokes, is also a common girl's name. As we have seen there are several important holy sites in Kyrgyzstan called 'Cholpon Ata', associated with the protector spirit of sheep. The stars, which feature so much in song, are thought of as eternally young (especially the morning star, of course). But is a song that uses nature imagery to talk about feelings and human life, also talking *about* nature, rather than *through* it?

It has been suggested that nature imagery in Japanese poetry and art does not in fact express a love of nature, but that it is used as a metaphor. It is always *tamed*, conquered nature that is praised (Kalland 1996: 243). In the examples of Kyrgyz poetry and songs discussed here, it is not tamed nature, in vases, gardens, fields or domestic livestock that is the object of admiration. It is the liveliness and loveliness of wild animals, rushing waters and blossoming meadows that draw *arman*. As mentioned earlier, the direct translation of 'wildness' (*japaiychylyk*) has very negative connotations and it does not appear in any of the poetry I have consulted.²⁸⁵ *Japaiychylyk* is not the quality particularly admired in the 'wild' birds people sing of or name their daughters after, but nor are they 'tame'.

When I look at your picture

It reminds me of the flowers blooming on the shores of the lake.

Do you remember those evening conversations

Sweet words bursting from our hearts?...

In Nargiza's song, is the lover's invocation of the stars and lake waters at his meeting with his sweet-heart not just a coy way of alluding to their kisses in that environment? Should

²⁸⁴ *Nur* or *Noor* in Sufism is a divine or spiritual light. It is striking that people never seem to be named after domestic animals. On the contrary, sheep or donkey is a term of abuse. *Baran*, the Russian word for sheep is a derogatory term for ethnic Kyrgyz. Nor are animals (domestic or wild) particularly prevalent motifs in poetry and song. Coote describes Nilotic pastoralists elaborate aesthetics based on beautiful cattle (1992). I do not find such a strong link between animals and beauty. Horses and birds are the only animals I have heard picked out as beautiful.

²⁸⁵ In chapter 6 I noted how people described not being able to write, having lost civilization as *japaiy*.

we dismiss nature imagery as nothing more than a handy metaphor for desire and feelings? I contend that since song texts are so widely invented, listened to and performed, and that since they so regularly invoke admiration for stars, rushing water or swans, this imagery must *resonate*. It is not only for the sake of kisses that the lover above remembers the lakeshore: the memory of the twinkling stars and flowers are as much a part of his *arman* for this moment as his girl-friend. Romantic desire and longing for lake shores etc. point out the force of feeling in each: that is why they tessellate so well. This may be a case of the ‘metaphors Kyrgyz song-writers live by’ (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

We have seen that people tend to choose riverbanks or lakesides for enjoying scenic outings. This is partly for the prosaic reason that you need water for cooking a picnic meal, and for life in general. As I discussed in chapter 3, there is also the strong association of water with *tazalyk* (purity, honesty, uprightness), in contexts such as the *taza* air and water of the summer pastures, last refuge of *taza* Kyrgyz customs. Water is also central to Kyrgyzstan as a regional power. People use water imagery in their compositions very frequently.

The ubiquity of love songs is not matched by the ubiquity of love matches in Kyrgyzstan. Just like the lake shore or forests, these are not frequent or easily accessible experiences for most. Many girls would not be allowed to meet their lover on the lakeshore, or to go wandering on some mountain meadow. The period of courtship of the kind described in both pop and folk songs is often quite short.²⁸⁶ The very rarity of experiencing both happiness in romantic love, and in wandering through forests or sitting by lake-sides, emphasizes the preciousness of each.²⁸⁷

Pop video imagery also emphasizes an element of desire that is not voiced in the lyrics: wealth. Footage of boy taking girl to a romantic rendezvous in nature usually involves a very smart car and they are usually shown living the lifestyle of the super-rich. In ‘real life’, urban young men try to borrow a fancy car - ideally a Mercedes - to impress their girl-friends. Video clips accompanying songs on other topics such as love of parents or funny songs tend to reflect a much more common life-style. Based on the situations Nargiza and Maral sing from, the visions that pop songs evoke, the didacticism on one hand and *arman* of songs on the other, it seems songs generally do not reflect what is, the status quo, but *wishes*. What

²⁸⁶There is a wide spectrum of marriage patterns: arranged marriages, young men and women choosing each other as well as *ala kachuu* abductions.

²⁸⁷ City parks are one of the rare places that lovers can meet relatively unobserved, or observed only by their peers and general public. On park benches, girls can be at the same time unobserved and safe.

people commemorate in songs are *ideals*, and the beauty of nature is part of imagining these ideals: the beauty of women, the purity of water or the thrill of a romantic tryst.²⁸⁸ Whereas toasts and pop videos have a place for voicing material ideals (a Mercedes, wishing someone health, wealth and success), *bereke* hardly appears explicitly in song or poetry texts.²⁸⁹

While love songs as such use the resonances of ‘love for nature’ to talk about romantic feelings, there are plenty of other songs that are directly about the delights of the mountains, water or the home valley. While romantic feelings are revelled in publicly only in song and poetry, this is not the case for ‘love of nature’: as we saw in chapter 2, plenty of people unembarrassedly express longing for the *jailoo* in everyday conversations. They might also talk wistfully of visiting lake Yssyk-kul, or some other impressive, marvellous place they dream of, for example Moscow. Appreciation of natural beauty is also quite mundanely part of the discourse of patriotism. *The sky rides a rock face like a horse/ Which is close the Moon and the Sun./ One can imagine how lovely,/ Nomad life in spring* (Toktogulov 2003: 12). The national anthem begins by invoking high mountains and valleys, creating a link between love of different kinds: a kind of ‘state’ and ‘land’ romance. Admiration of *jailoos* can fold into love of *tuulgan jer*, which in turn can fold into attachment to the Kyrgyz Republic: territory, people and state.

The place where I grew up

...

I look at your valley without taking my eyes away

I am your son, who does not compare his land to anything else.

Your water is the water of life, your stones are gold and your air like medicine

There is power in your salt, which is known to everybody.

You have been the navel of Kyrgyz lands from ancient times.

Your mountains surround and protect you

By keeping you safe from outside catastrophes.

(Ramanov 2004: 6)

²⁸⁸ Beauty in people is called ‘*suluuluk*’ while in other things it is ‘*koozduk*’. People found it quite funny when I confused the two.

²⁸⁹ One could argue that since love songs or poetry about nature usually focus on the summer, they describe the *time of year* when livestock get fat, when wealth is created, but I think that argument rather far-fetched.

Here, Ramanov speaks of his birthplace as a parent, which is reminiscent of the way both Russian folklore, Soviet propaganda as well as other modern states, speak of the motherland (Russian: *rodina*) and its ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’. And we have here also the element of *arman*, of yearning for an absence (here inflected with looking forward to seeing home again soon). Talipjan Eshmatov, writing a two hundred page paean for his native village and its inhabitants, also declaims ‘*spacious motherland, isn’t its value equal to heaven*’? He lists the famous people of the region, and believes he has inherited some of his talent from the hero Toktogul, whose fate and achievements conclude the poem (Eshmatov 2000: 42). In another poem, he describes appreciating one’s homeland and ancestors as his poetic duty (Eshmatov 2000: 45). This reiterates the sense of poets as moral guides.

However, in contrast to the explicit patriotism and celebration of political leaders common in contemporary Uzbek pop, in these poems and songs it is the *absence* of any reference to the state, or even the nation that is striking. I would suggest that invoking these directly is not necessary: patriotism can be implied in love for the homeland.

*If you go to Ak-Tash, know this,
That all of its hills and valleys are covered with flowers.
If you lie on the grass it is interesting
As half is green and half is yellow.*
(Toktogulov 2003: 41)

This poem harks back to the argument of the *jailoos*’ beauty lying partly in the wealth in livestock it creates, discussed in chapter 2. We have seen how a *jailoo* meadow can be likened to a beautifully spread feast, with foods for all kinds of beasts. One might also relate this kind of ‘carpet’ of flowers to real felt carpets, their borders embracing a symmetrical and yet soft pattern of highly contrasting colours, not unlike the vibrant patches of mountain flowers in the early summer. Certainly, festive spreads and felt carpets follow the same aesthetic priorities of ensuring symmetry and variety.

Poems rather rarely focus on nature as an object of virtuous behaviour, although there is the occasional didactic poem about nature. The tone of this green activism rings new, and I have not found any folk or pop songs that explicitly advocate respect for nature. Intriguingly, this is the only kind of poem where I found nature described as wealth (*bailyk*).

Nature – air, water, earth:

Since ancient times it is a whole.

It creates good conditions for all people

It offers people the flower of life.

Let's not cut trees for firewood.

Let's not burn them and collect their remains.

...

If we take good care of

Nature, it will be the only wealth we can leave the future.²⁹⁰

(Özүbekov 2008)

²⁹⁰ 'Nature' here is *jaratylysh*, using the term related to creation.



Figure 25: Teachers' Day celebrations in full swing

The End of the Party: Conclusion

After plenty of toasts, eating and singing at Gümüşkhan's table, everyone is called out to hand over their presents. The video recorder running, Gümüşkhan and Aibek sit on a sofa in their yard, while a master of ceremonies (*tamada*) announces each guest. The most senior relatives go first, saying a few words at the microphone, handing over presents and embracing the hosts. Everyone applauds the guest's effort and the present is recorded in a small booklet. A sparkly-clean orange *Moskvich* (a second-hand Soviet era car) sits in the yard: the children have offered their parents their very first car. Several carpets are draped over the roof, boxes of glassware, a large framed landscape painting, embroidered long jackets, many white headscarves and reams of dress cloth. This is *bereke*: wealth, generosity in abundance. At last, Gümüşkhan spreads her arms and, head held high, dances sedately into the centre of the yard, inviting us all to join her. The band strikes up, and we're off...

The young keyboardist, singer and accordionist are all dressed like Kyrgyz pop stars in leather jackets, with carefully gelled fringes. They play all the radio hits. In the dark and

drizzle, Gümüşkhan moves among the crowd, rewarding the best dancers with small bills tucked into their scarves or jacket pockets. A tray of vodka glasses and titbits circles, offered to small circles of people, who declaim toasts until the tray-bearer moves on. Like toasting and singing, dancing is something only the very old or busy can opt out of. We form a chain with our arms over each others' shoulders, dance towards each other, shaking hips and rumps, arms raised and embroidering the music with twirls of the wrist and fingers. Nargiza dances with her little girl on her arm while one thoroughly inebriated uncle is handed around, each woman gigglingly or impatiently getting rid of his attentions.

By midnight we are all waiting tiredly for the main course to arrive. Aibek meticulously apportions the meat according to seniority: from the head through the shanks to the ribs and plaited innards. We help ourselves from large plates of *besh barmak*: noodles, onions and mutton with teacups of strong broth. After many hours the meal comes to a close, our hosts Aibek and Gümüşkhan take the word in turn: *'Friends and relatives are important, we hope we will meet again soon. Dear in-laws, we respect you very much, thank you for coming. This has been truly excellent. Let's drink a final toast.'* We all cup our hands with the host, as the guest of honour (or whoever knows how to say some lines of prayer in Arabic) says a blessing (*bata*). *'Oomin'* we reply, as we raise our hands and wipe our faces in a gesture of cleansing. Nargiza and helpers have come up with plastic bags which each guest makes into the *keshik*, a 'doggy bag' for everyone at home who could not come.

Nobody goes home on their own. Everybody gets a lift in someone's car, women club together to walk home, or are walked home safely by a young man, waving away plenty of teases. Nargiza covers someone fast asleep in the corner carefully with a winter coat. When everyone has left, the remaining family and helpers gather for a cup of tea and browse the left-overs. Nargiza's back hurts, and so does mine. Maybe we will leave some of the washing up till the morning.

I have spoken so far of various 'reasons' for making poetry and songs: as a gift to others, as a form of expressing positive feelings, as a didactic tool. Undoubtedly, as Bunn notes, the impulse to sing or compose is also simply the impulse to create something beautiful (2000: 323). It may be useful at this point to compare her analysis of *shyrdak* felt carpets to what I have said about song and poetry, since both address questions of beauty and creativity. Women create *shyrdaks* preferably with bright, contrasting colours that create a balanced pattern. They talk of the colours as *'the colours of nature'* or *'Kyrgyz colours'* (Bunn 2000: 385). In Bunn's analysis of people's everyday appreciation of *shyrdaks*, what each motif

‘means’ is not particularly important: ‘*Seeing them as a representation of something else does not make sense*’. It is rather the overall effect, the experience of it (in the making as well as in using it) that counts (Bunn 2000: 332-4). Verbal arts like poems and songs share this with carpet-making, but are also more plainly referential: the word for star, *Jyldyz*, may be pleasing to the ear, but it also immediately brings to the mind’s eye the image or experience of starlight.²⁹¹

I have sought to reveal how the people I lived with in 2006-2008 *did* ‘having a rest’, pleasure in picnics, feasts and art, *arman* and *jakshylyk*: I translate this as kinds of ‘happiness’. As I suggested in the introduction, I have in this chapter only dealt with certain contexts of *jakshylyk*. As the experience of picnics, parties and singing demonstrates, this *jakshylyk* can vary in emotional tone from sober contentment and dignity (of our host Gümüşkhan, of Maral as a grandmother) to delighted dance and hilarious intoxication. As we saw in chapter 7, proponents of Islam tend to promote a sober (in the broadest sense) kind of happiness: in early 21st century Kyrgyzstan, Islam is rarely an ecstatic experience.²⁹² On the other hand, the widespread inducement to share alcohol promotes the latter kind of collective fuzzy warm feeling. Clearly the desirability of different kinds of positive emotions is neither undisputed nor equally shared. It would require further research to investigate more closely how people’s ideas of the good life, and of the role of music have changed in the recent past.

Embodied experience is central to understanding how people enjoy song and its prevalent content. The specificities of *how* people choose to ‘*have a rest*’, ‘*play*’ or celebrate is significant. Following Wulff, I have traced positive emotions as a relational and social experience, as something people create intentionally and skilfully, as well as experience on their own or together. They include emotional interactions with places like *jailoos* and homelands, as well as with institutions such as the nation-state, or objects like a dam. If it was not for real life experience of natural beauty, at *jailoos*, picnics or even on TV, poetry would not resonate with nature imagery. The appreciation of a particular kind of nature in visiting shady riverbanks or *jailoos* also links up to the *mazar* visits discussed in chapter 4. Indeed,

²⁹¹ Elsewhere, attempts have been made to identify ‘cross-domain mapping’ between Azerbaijani carpets and *mugham* music, both being arts where Azerbaijani artists appreciate symmetry and subtle variation in form, and may take inspiration for *mugham* from the carpets they perform on (Naroditskaya 2005). I am not suggesting such a strict correspondence.

²⁹² Since Central Asia is the birthplace of Sufi brotherhoods and *zikr* practices are alive and well nearby, this was probably not always the case.

mazars are occasionally impromptu picnic sites and like picnics, serious *mazar* visits involve serving good food outdoors and appreciating nature, though in a very different, religious register that deals with natural phenomena as persons.

People do not generally speak of *jakshylyk* as beauty, and yet there are intriguing links between the two. Powerful sites like *mazars*, that can confer material, bodily and social well-being, are usually also thought beautiful, like Shamshykal. The same is true of *jailoos*, as we have seen. Does beauty then connote a form of power? If so, it is a power *to* rather than power *over*, that can alternatively be described as being full of life, like running water. These associations also point towards the quality of *tazalyk*.

I have suggested that invoking *arman* is central to what Kyrgyz pop and folk songs and poetry are all about. I would argue that this *arman* is primarily about moments of delight (romantic trysts, wonder at natural beauty) rather than sober contentment. This is where *arman* is a different kind of relationship to absences from the kind of nostalgia I discussed in chapter 6. Nostalgic accounts of the Soviet era tend to focus on material well-being and sober contentment rather than *beauty*. Such nostalgia, unlike *arman*, implicitly or explicitly demands change of the present. Given the different mode of communication (personal conversation, oral history versus public performance), the apolitical appearance of song and poetry is not surprising. Indeed, I would argue that popular songs are purposefully a-political, in the sense of avoiding tension or disagreement. They are political in the sense of using songs as personal gifts *and* collective experiences to create *birimdik* or *yntymak* (good relations, unity), just like toasts and blessings do. As Karabai Ramanov says:

*People's good deeds, inner worlds,
Souls, heart, understanding and minds.
These are ruled by the happiness made of wonders.
This I have shared through the world of poetry.*

The didactic tone of poetry or songs is further political in the widest sense, without undermining *birimdik*. Even pop videos suggest 'let us live like this: virtuously, and with a Mercedes at our disposal'. 'If we take good care of Nature, it will be the only wealth we can leave the future'. I have suggested that this role for the verbal arts is consistent with a long-standing idea of wordsmiths as moral guides as well as being inspired to compose from

strong movements of the hearts, particularly *arman*. As Ramanov's poem suggests, this is a kind of inner wealth that nourishes him and others.

Though the public exposure of folk music, pop music and private poetry are very different, their range in content, imagery and messages is remarkably similar, as the single Kyrgyz word for both (*yr*) would suggest. If Abu-Lughod shows that in the Bedouin case, there are two distinct discourses (everyday language and poetry) that differ in tone and content, this is only partially true for Kyrgyz poetry and music. People can easily wax lyrical about the beauties of picnics, *jailoos* or their home village in an everyday conversation. What they are less likely to do is to wax lyrical about romantic feelings, which are nevertheless regularly evoked publicly in song. I have already discussed how conversely, an angry kind of regret or desire for material things has less space in poetry and song (with the exception of the imagery, rather than the texts of pop videos). In other words, what people commemorate in poetry and song are *ideals*, of which natural beauty is a constant component, or at the very least, allegory. Perhaps the avoidance of anger or material desires is the reason why songs are rarely used as explicit political propaganda these days, though the prestige of certain artists or enjoyment of the music itself can be used to frame political events or parties.

On the icy pass near the high peak

I saw a bird, flying without fear

I used to be a young girl, bright like the morning star.

These lines connect human emotions, language and land, as Basso suggested. If positive emotions, their generation in song and poetry, at parties and picnics are a social process, then they are also an achievement, moments of joy and areas of contentment that deserve to be celebrated.



Figure 26: Tiered landscape seen from *jailoo*, with Bel Aldy by the river below and Toktogul reservoir in the far distance

Chapter 9: Conclusion

I started to write this conclusion the day after President Bakiev was ousted by widespread demonstrations and violence in the streets all across Kyrgyzstan in April 2010. It seems very strange to conclude anything in this context. And yet some of the desires I spoke of - for dignified work, for being able to afford good food, the political constellations of funding and exploiting dams - have loomed large in these events. People like Anarbek are hoping that despite the bloodshed, this is a turn for the better in Kyrgyzstan. Other people like Liudmilla are likely to be more afraid, after minority groups were targeted by mobs around Bishkek. Raima and Tolkunbek's grown children in the Bishkek suburbs are safe, but they will wait a while for the situation to calm down before visiting them.

How have we profited from comparing dams, pastures and *mazars* to answer the questions I set out in this thesis? How do these places matter to people like the rich ex-*kulak* Bazarkul Ata, my saddle-maker uncle Nurakun Ata, Nargiza's management of her life as a village *kelin* or Saikal Apa, who this year feels too old to travel to *jailoos*?

In section one, I compared different ways of knowing these places. I investigated pastures as a managed ‘economic’ sphere in law and scholarship, as emotional attachment, livelihood and aspect of the good life. There is more to be done in investigating how such different frames for interacting with pasture, or with dams and *mazars* intersect, and how they affect what can or cannot be done through a place. All the frames I discussed play a part in the moral geographies of someone like Elmira, in how deeply she values the relative security of keeping livestock, the health, beauty, *tazalyk* and pride in Kyrgyzzness that working on *jailoos* offers her. Her understanding of modern comforts, that she also locates in the Soviet era, make her denigrate the conditions of her life’s work as ‘shit’ sometimes too.

While from a development perspective the pastures appear most regularly as a vast space to be managed in the most profitable and sustainable manner, by and for the population, as *beauty* and homes, *jailoos* have the specific and inexchangeable nature of ‘place’. With respect to the Naryn dams, I have argued that it is their very space-ness, the heroic story of Soviet state plus workers harnessing rivers for profit that makes it such a special place for Liudmilla Fedorovna for example. Whether the state will be as successful in convincing citizens that it is ‘serving the people’ by building the Kambar Ata dam, looks doubtful at present. Both the example of the *jailoo* and the dams demonstrate that in these cases, space is not an *a priori*, but a vision, a vision that can require large investments to realize. If ‘bought’, this vision has political consequences: for the early 20th century inhabitants of the ‘empty’ steppe, for the state of Indonesian rainforests (cf. Tsing 2005), for how people from the flooded Toktogul valley are treated. So much for the power of ideas.

On the other hand, I have argued that matter matters to state and other forms of ownership. Kyrgyz pasture users can often ignore the law as well as most state actors, because pastures are so wide and dispersed: they are virtually unfence-able. The leverage the state has over an equally ‘rich’ place, a common good like the Toktogul dam is quite different, because it is in one place, worked by experts and amounts of electricity made and sent around the region are invisible to citizens. To reiterate, if technologies have their own scripts (Schnitzler 2010:9), so does the materiality of particular places: they enable and disable social relations and relations with place in quite different ways.

An overarching Philosophy of Place or Nature?

Clearly, access to the benefits of places such as *jailoos*, dams and *mazars*, cosmopolitan or modern-type places are keenly appreciated by people like Yrysbek travelling to Turkey, Bazarkul who was exiled to a nearby ravine in his childhood, or Gulnara in Kötörmö, a new village without a reliable water supply, next to a reservoir. Attending places like *jailoos*, *mazars* or a riverside for a picnic can make you a better, healthier and happier person. I found little ‘moral geography’ in Basso’s terms, where Western Apache connect a moral tale to a certain spot by the river in order to encourage people to behave well. In these terms, *mazars* stand out as the most directly ‘moralizing’: here, proper attitudes and behaviour are rewarded and punished swiftly. The difference to Basso’s example is that in my experience people do not use stories about such places to influence others. There is no need. Most are in awe of the place as a powerful and responsive entity in itself.

It is because the state works along the lines of the usual secular territorial spatial concepts of the nation-state that there is less certainty about whether *mazars* are ‘resources’ to be managed and exploited: if they are ‘true’, then they cannot be legislated about or their blessings fenced like an inanimate substance. In this sense, *mazars* present a case that a ‘modern constitution’, which recognizes no fuzziness between human subject and non-human object, can no longer account for (cf. Latour 1993). A future project might go further in exploring how other types of places such as villages or cities might be agentic.

If there are such different ways of thinking about place, I have suggested that one reason why the view of places as enspirited, as resource-filled spaces or as embodying health-giving beauty seem to co-exist relatively easily, is that each is strongly anchored in different *kinds* of places: *mazars*, dams and *jailoos*, villages and cities. Unlike Humphrey’s depiction of Mongol philosophy as harmony with nature, I have only detected fragments of such a philosophy in my fieldwork encounters. It is possible, but not necessarily the case, that this fragmentary and differentiated interaction with the world is a result of more relational ideas about objects being forcefully discouraged in the past as ‘religion’. But why should people engage with the world around them according to only one frame? Why should there be any coherence in relating different frames, when they are pertinent to quite different contexts – and places?

Place and Time: a Memorious Landscape?

Just like the many memories people shared with me, a piece of writing like a thesis is an act of interpretation, valorisation and commemoration. In Section Two I reflected on the kinds of relationship Nurakun Ata and others create between past, present and future. What is the point of remembering around Toktogul, how do you do it in language or otherwise, and what role if any do places have in these commemorations? I pointed out how people stressed continuity (though not stasis) through the practice of counting *sanjira* genealogies and certain wider bonds as *uruu* and ‘blood’, also honouring beloved dead through death rites including laments and feasts, and silences where there was nothing good to say. Not commemorating, not being able to commemorate raises the spectre of the *mankurt*, a slave to be manipulated.

People like Anarbek spoke about change and their personal role and agency in bringing it about, in a rather particular way. The epic genre and praise songs such as those by (and later about) Toktogul Satylganov could merge quite easily with the Soviet leadership cult and singling out of ‘average’ individuals as hero workers or hero mothers. This was one repertoire (or is it several?) that someone like Alimkhan Apa could draw on in telling her girlhood journey to Suusamir, acting a bit like a female *baatyr*, but also like a more conventional good woman in aiding others. Liudmilla Fedorovna also told her story in the heroic mode, as taking part in building a Socialist future, even as the collectivity and future she held fast to dissolved. Responsibility for less palatable events, such as privatization or dekulakization was in conversations routinely either anonymized (the collapse of the Soviet order as a quasi-natural catastrophe) or deflected onto ‘great men’ with whom people felt no ‘blood’ connection or otherwise. This is not just a move of self-protection, but also quite simply that many people did not feel powerful in the upheaval of the early 90s.

One other feature of how people told *their* pasts was in how far movement gave them public and familial authority. Functionaries like Anarbek, and later migrant labourers like Yrysbek could profit from their association with prestigious places abroad. In both cases, such movements confer confidence. This may even be the case for an urbanite like Nargiza asserting herself as a village *kelin*. *Kul'tura* of the Soviet, post-Soviet or plainly urban variety was one important attribute of each of these people. The idyllic childhood that Alimkhan Apa and Nargiza spoke of, and that Maral Eje sang of, perhaps express something of the loss of childhood places and families that women marrying away face. However, as we saw in chapter 8, this kind of *arman* is also a generic sentiment purposely enjoyed in Kyrgyz

music.²⁹³

I argued in chapter 6 that *comparison* as a strong claim to how things *ought* to be is a feature of how people like Bazarkul Ata, Liudmilla Fedorovna or Elmira talk about the recent past. Others like Nurakun Ata take earlier, harsher times of the Soviet epoch as their point of comparison, their defining moment. I further showed that talking of history primarily as comparing ‘epochs’ that suddenly switch, is not static in the least. On the contrary, if change happens as revolution and through great or bad leaders, it makes the future very uncertain. Yrysbek is hopeful about this future, to Liudmilla the (recent) Soviet past is brighter. Both of their views are shaped by a narrative of becoming cultured, one way or the other. Kadyrbek Ata goes so far as to say ‘*there was nothing*’ before Soviet civilization, Anarbek on the other hand thinks traditional/modern qualities such as entrepreneurship disappeared in the Soviet era, and are now reviving. On all these scales, *kul’tura* is located in a linked hierarchy of particular places, between Turkey and Moscow, *jailoos*, Toktogul town and the Kambar Ata dam.

I have shown how places and times thus overlap as more or less modern. I demonstrated that all these accounts - whether the Soviet era is the relevant other, modernity or second tradition - speak the language of Fabian’s ‘typological time’. None of these particularly valorise the present as the present, or mundane villages as opposed to the glorious eternal-ancient mountain pastures and eternal-future hydro-power. These are examples of Fabian’s ‘*topoi*’, where a move from place to place is also a move between co-existing ‘evolutionary’ stages (Fabian 1983:109-112). Such links also include an idea of *remoteness*. If one follows such a temporal and geographic trajectory, one can conceive of the Toktogul valley as a tiered landscape, from the low-lying dam to *mazars* to skyward mountain pastures. Insofar as places are ordered and related to each other in this way, it is true that ‘*stories make, organize and link places. They are spatial trajectories*’ (De Certeau and Giard 1998:115). This is not to say that even just among linear narratives, there aren’t counter-narratives of ‘decadence’ or of civilization as ‘Islamic’ or nomadic for example.

But what of the wider view by Ingold and Massey of places as processes, as more than mnemonic pegs (the latter assume at least semi-permanent features)? It is possible to read much of the enthusiasm for *jailoos*, as for lapping waters in song and so on as indexing the summer season, or the ‘bloom’ of youth rather than a place. Insofar, it is reasonable to merge time and place in ‘rhythm’, as Ingold suggests (2000: 10-11). It is also possible to link

²⁹³ Sorrow is also associated strongly with women and song, as they sing the funeral laments.

modern and non-modern, eternally Kyrgyz and backward places to an ‘up’ and ‘down’ (if not forward and backward) in fortunes. As discussed, such mutability can be painful and call forth nostalgia, as well as *arman*. However, taken place by place, each is mostly understood as something enduring, such as a *mazar*, and - in a hopeful mood - a dam. Despite this idea of places as relatively continuous, rather than the attention to constant shape-shifting typical of archaeologists, I did not find stories (in the sense of anecdotes, legends, historical events) were necessarily the most important bit, the most ‘moral’ bit of geographies surrounding *mazars*, *jailoos*, dams or villages. They came to the fore as the *sanjira* of a village, and correlated some measure of entitlement to belong and use such a place. Stories came more to the fore in the narrative of becoming cultured, affecting many aspects of personhood and place.

In the last section of the thesis I considered places from the angle of practices, morally (in the dual sense of the word) inflected practices. In chapter 7 I suggested work was a polysemous term, encompassing differences in discourse and practice that can be traced back to Socialist, Muslim and kinship notions of labour. I discussed the kinds of work my host father Tolkunbek does as a leader and farmer, what Midin *Ake* considers his work of *servicing people* as a *moldo* to be, and Elmira’s devotion to caring for her extended family as a *kelin*. I suggested that all these very different kinds of work require *tartip* and making an effort. All the positive ideas of work stand against the figure of the slave. Work is about conscious and deliberate activity in serving a variety of constituencies: building Socialism for humanity, or as an entrepreneur ‘each to his own’. It is worth recalling that *tartip* as the external force of the state is something quite different from internal motivations, systematically encouraged or no. Part of the assessment of the Soviet period in comparison with now circles around this debate on work and *tartip*. I have argued that each of these roles: Socialist worker, entrepreneur, *kelin*, *moldo* allows for a quite different sense of self and relation to others, and quite different rewards. As places can be hierarchized, partly according to the work done in each, so professions can be more or less *kul’turnii*, more or less Kyrgyz, more or less dignified and provide a more or less adequate standard of living. As such, work also is placed and timed.

I argued the commonly voiced opinion that ‘poor people are lazy’ is *descriptive* in the sense that those without resources have little to work *with*, and *normative* in the sense of willing the world to offer just rewards for one’s efforts, beyond the inherent value of work as service. This logic posits work as the only virtuous, satisfying way to meet material and non-

material needs. The Toktogul dam is a grand symbol of collective labour and its benefits under state leadership. I have claimed that because the nature of the state and aims of collective labour no longer attain the legitimacy many people accorded the Soviet state, so a new dam like Kambar Ata is quite a different object, produced by different kinds of subjects.

In the last chapter, I turned to exploring how people take pleasure in places and express their enjoyment and appreciation of beauty in poetry and song. I did so to counteract the portrayal of post-Soviet lives as primarily miserable, and to understand better what motivates people to work, or to work on *jailoos*, for example. I discovered quite specific qualities and concepts that people appreciated such as *tazalyk* and *arman*, that do not dissolve into common human ‘goods’. I discussed the very best of life, *jakshylyk*, as created through poetry and song, toasts and riverside picnics. If people did not equate *jakshylyk* and *beauty*, yet places that gave blessings like the Cholpon Ata or ‘grandmother spring’ *mazar* are often talked about as beautiful. The same is true of *jailoos*, which generate qualities of health, wealth, *tazalyk* and ‘Kyrgyzness’. I never heard the dams, or even the dam reservoir talked about as beautiful, even in the poetry written about them. This despite the fact that dams and reservoir are closely associated with an otherwise wonderful and *taza* substance: water.

In the case of *jailoos* and *mazars* they provide happiness as a combination of beauty, health, virtue and material well-being. In these cases, Overing and Passes suggestion of rubbing out the boundaries around ‘aesthetic beauty’ as separate from religion or economics certainly makes sense. This move makes less sense in the case of dams, or the graded *kul’turnost/modernity* of people, their work and habitations in villages and towns.

I found that parties (*toi*) were events that brought together *jakshylyk* in both senses of the term, as enjoyment and as virtue, ‘proper’ occasions when life-sustaining relationships with qualities of *birimdik* (unity) and *yntymak* (good relations) could be displayed, created and strengthened. I further investigated how many poets and singers connect human emotions, language and features of places, using romantic imagery of nature in love songs. I argued that if songs use nature imagery to talk in a publicly acceptable manner about romantic love, this imagery would not resonate if many people did not in fact seek out experiences of natural beauty, on TV, in oil paintings, at picnics, *jailoos* and *mazars*. I also noted that this love of nature can fold into love of home, homeland, birthplace –and finally stately patriotism.

I discussed the widespread and long-standing understanding of poets and musicians as moral guides and commentators, and how song and poetry, like toasts, most often talk

about wishes and ideals, which natural beauty *is* and can stand for. *Arman*, delicious yearning seemed the most prevalent emotion expressed, invoked and enjoyed in these art forms. Like the nostalgic modes of talking about the Soviet past discussed in chapter 6, *arman* is a way of valuing what is absent, rare or past, including ideals. But unlike the kind of nostalgia I encountered in conversations with people like Koichubek Ata, the *arman* in ‘*we were young, bright as stars*’ focuses on non-material and beautiful aspects of life and does not read as a head-on challenge to the present. Nevertheless, I have argued that such romantic songs or positive poetry or toasts are not a-political, since they are gifts often explicitly seeking to bolster whatever potential for ideals like *yntyamak* are available in the present company or imagined audience.

Implications beyond the Ethnographic Moment of early 21st century Toktogul

What wider implications does an ethnography of how people in the Toktogul district of Kyrgyzstan relate to specific places have for Central Asia, the post-Soviet region, for scholars of place, time, work and happiness elsewhere? I hope this ethnography has persuasively argued that a perspective on place as *nothing but* social construct, is insufficient. On the question of property relations, I have demonstrated that ethnographers and theorists do well to attend to the materiality of the thing owned: state ownership of a concrete machine holding water like a dam, state ownership of vast seasonal pastures does not amount to the same thing. Such an argument also goes against analyses that treat landscape as language, bodies as texts. In seeking access to things as text - the most familiar thing of all to scholars - it seems scholars sometimes lose from view that owning *jailoos* and dams are not the same relationship.

I also argued that people are quite comfortable believing and interacting with different places in radically different ways: as place or neutral ‘space’ for instance. This throws some doubt on ethnographies that describe homogenous ‘Mongolian’ ways of interacting with land, landscape, place, including those who postulate total, or partial de-territorialization. Showing that *jailoos* are not just economic spaces, I have argued for scholars and policy-makers making fewer assumptions about what *kind* of economic wealth, what *kind* of modernity, what *kind* of food etc. people are after. Otherwise development and government agencies can quickly find themselves at cross-purposes with the ‘objects’ of their aid.

Glossary

Ake: older brother, respectful form of address for any man older than ego (*baike* in Northern Kyrgyzstan).

Aksakal: literally ‘white-beard’, male elder. May also participate in lowest rung of courts, the *aksakaldar sotu*.

Akyn: bard, improviser, composer and singer of songs, often accompanies himself on a *komuz*.

Apa: mother, respectful form of address for any elderly woman older than ego.

Ash: remembrance feast, held a year or more after death.

Ata: father, respectful form of address for any elderly man older than ego.

Aiyl: village, originally term for group of *boz üi* moving together.

Aiyl ökmötü: village government/representative body since 1996, consisting of a president (also called the *aiyl ökmötü*), a village council (*aiyl kengesh*) and specialists such as an agronomist.

Arbak: a dead soul, also the spirits of heroes visiting a *manaschi*, or non-human spirits that help or oppose a healer.

Bada: shepherding arrangement where the shepherd’s family receives a monthly fee and much of the produce from herded animals.

Bai: rich, rich person, pre-Soviet leader. Colloquial synonyms: *bii*, *manap*.

Baibiche: honorific term, respected grand-mother and wife.

Baraka: Uzbek, originally Arabic term for divine blessing (also transliterated as ‘*barakah*’).

Bata: blessing.

Baatyr: hero.

Bereke: abundance, good fortune.

Besh barmak: literally ‘five fingers’, festive dish of home-made noodles, onion broth and slowly stewed meat, usually delivered on large plates serving several people.

Bii: pre-Soviet leader, judge. Colloquial synonyms: *bai*, *manap*.

Birimdik or **birdik:** unity.

Bolush: term probably from Russian *volost*’ i.e. district, also denotes district administrator or village headman.

Borsook: small pieces of deep-fried dough, indispensable to any celebration.

Boz üi: yurt, large tent made of collapsible wooden trellises and supports, covered with large sheets of grey-brown felt.

Bulak: spring, source.

Chakchak: brittle eggy deep-fried dough.

Chapan: calf-length embroidered robe, worn by men on formal occasions or more casually by elders.

Chërnaia kassa: (Russian) an agreed sum of money is given by each participant at a specified time to a member of the group. Often the exchange happens at a meal or party that the recipient hosts. A practice particularly common among mature women.

Chokoi: boots made of leather and felt.

Cholpon: Venus, the morning star. Common female name.

Dubana: religious mendicant.

Dyikan: farmer, peasant.

Ee: owner, also spirit of a mazar.

Eje: older sister, respectful form of address for any woman, related or unrelated, older than ego.

Estrada: more exactly ‘*estradnaya musika*’, popular Soviet music, term used from mid-twentieth century to distinguish it from ideologically dubious Western pop.

GES: acronym for *Gidro-Elektro Stantsiya* (Russian), hydro-electric power station.

Ilkham: inspiration.

Yiyk: holy.

Yntymak: cooperation, agreement, good relations.

Yr: song, also poem.

Yr kese: game, whoever is handed a bowl filled with rubbish from the table performs a song and chooses the next performer.

Jailoo: summer pasture, colloquially term used for any pasture at a distance from permanent settlements.

Jakshylyk: goodness, happiness.

Jarma: drink of yoghurt mixed with fermented, sometimes malted grains such as wheat or maize. Also known as ‘Maksim’ or by the commercial name ‘Shoro’.

Jeti ata: seven fathers, the number of consecutive patrilineal forebears Kyrgyz are expected to remember.

Jigit: young man, brave young man.

Jyldyz: star, common female name.

Karolchu: care-taker.

Kasiet: power, holiness also quality, property or feature.

Kelin: daughter-in-law, also generic term for a young married woman.

Keremet: miracle.

Keshik: ‘doggy-bag’ of fried bread, sweets and meat to share with those who did not attend a feast.

Ketmen-Töbö: ancient name for Toktogul valley.

Khan: ruler.

Kyrgyzchylyk: literally ‘Kyrgyzness’, Kyrgyz religion or spirituality, practices associated with mazar pilgrimage such as healing and clairvoyance. Some intellectuals also promote it as *Tengirchilik*, *Tengrianizm*’ or *Tengrianstvo*.

Kolkhoz: (Russian) collective farm.

Komuz: three-stringed instrument held like a mandolin, usually of apricot wood.

Koozduk: beauty, prettiness (applied to things other than people).

Közü achyk: seer, fortune-teller.

Küch: force, power.

Kul: slave.

Kulak: (Russian) derogatory term for rich peasant.

Kymyz: national drink made of fermented mare’s milk, produced exclusively on high pastures.

Kymyzdyk: tall edible plant of the rhubarb family.

Manap: *uruu* leader in the pre-Soviet era, in the North East of Kyrgyzstan increasingly a hereditary position. Colloquial synonyms: *bii*, *bai*.

Manas: main protagonist of the Manas epic, often considered father of the Kyrgyz.

Manaschi: reciter of the Manas epic.

Mazar: holy site, site of pilgrimage and healing.

Moldo: like the Arabic ‘mullah’, devout Muslim practitioner who performs prayers for others, term also used as synonym for ‘imam’, the head of the mosque’s congregation.

Namaz okuu: literally to read or study prayer, to pray, to have a life-style fully committed to Islam, as understood locally.

Nooruz: Central Asian New Year on 21st March.

Oluiia: person who can see the future, sometimes translated as ‘saint’. In Kyrgyzstan a wise person, usually deceased, who can protect humans, and whom one may pray to. From Arabic *awliya* (persons close to god).

Oomin: concluding word to blessings or prayers, expresses agreement.

Pir: Sufi religious leader, saint. In Kyrgyzstan also protector spirits of different classes of animals.

Plov: festive dish of oily rice, carrots and meat, variously spiced.

Pokhod: (Russian) here, picnic. The original Russian term also denotes a march, hike or military campaign.

Raion: (Russian) district, administrative unit between village councils (*aiyl ökmötü*) and provinces (*oblast*).

Sanjira: genealogy counting descent through the male line.

Salt: custom, customary law

Sep: dowry.

Shaiyk: care-taker of holy site, devout person. Likely from the Arabic ‘sheikh’, honorific term for an elder and/or religious scholar.

Sherine: regular feast or party, participants take turns hosting each other.

Shirk: idolatry, polytheism (Arabic).

Shyrdak: felt carpet, made by cutting and sewing together a symmetrical pattern of felt in strong contrasting colours.

Sovkhoz: (Russian) Soviet era state farm.

Suluuluk: beauty (applied to persons).

Tamada: master of ceremonies at parties.

Tartip: order, discipline.

Taza: clean, pure, honest and upright.

Tazalyk: cleanliness, purity, honesty and uprightness.

Tengirchilik: see *Kyrgyzchylyk*.

Tilek: wish, intent.

Toi: Feast, celebration, party.

Tuulgan jer: literally ‘birth place’, but can also refer to the place of origin of fathers and grandfathers.

Tülöö: slaughter and consumption of animal at a holy site. Literally ‘to fade’, ‘lose colour’.

Tushoo Kesüü: literally the cutting of the hobbles, a feast and races to celebrate a young child’s first steps.

Tuura: true, right.

Ürkün: 1916 uprising against the war draft and allocating land to Russian settlers. Many Kyrgyz fled from retaliations as far as China and Afghanistan.

Uruu: patrilineage, descent line.

Uiat: shame, shameful, disgraceful, dishonour.

Xinjiang: formally Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Western-most province of China sharing a long border with Kyrgyzstan.

Zyiarat: pilgrimage.

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